Kino no Tabi Volume3

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These are the novel illustrations that were included in volume 3

キノの旅(たび)Ⅲ

the Beautiful World

真っ白だった。
上も、下も、右も、左も、ただ白かった。
「見事に何も見えないな」
「見事に何も見えないね」
「でも、すぐにまた、見えるようになる」
「見えるようになるだろうね」
「ねえ。見えるようになって、目の前にきれいさっぱり何もなかったらどうする？ちょっと嬉しくない？」
「ああ。でも、そんなことはありえないことを、ボクは知ってるからね」
「晴れたら、どうするつもり？」
「そうだな……、ここにいても仕方がないし、ボクにできることもない。出発するだろうな。それだけだ」
人間キノと言葉を話す二輪車エルメスの旅の話。短編連作の形で綴られる、大人気新感覚ノベル第３弾!!

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時雨沢恵一
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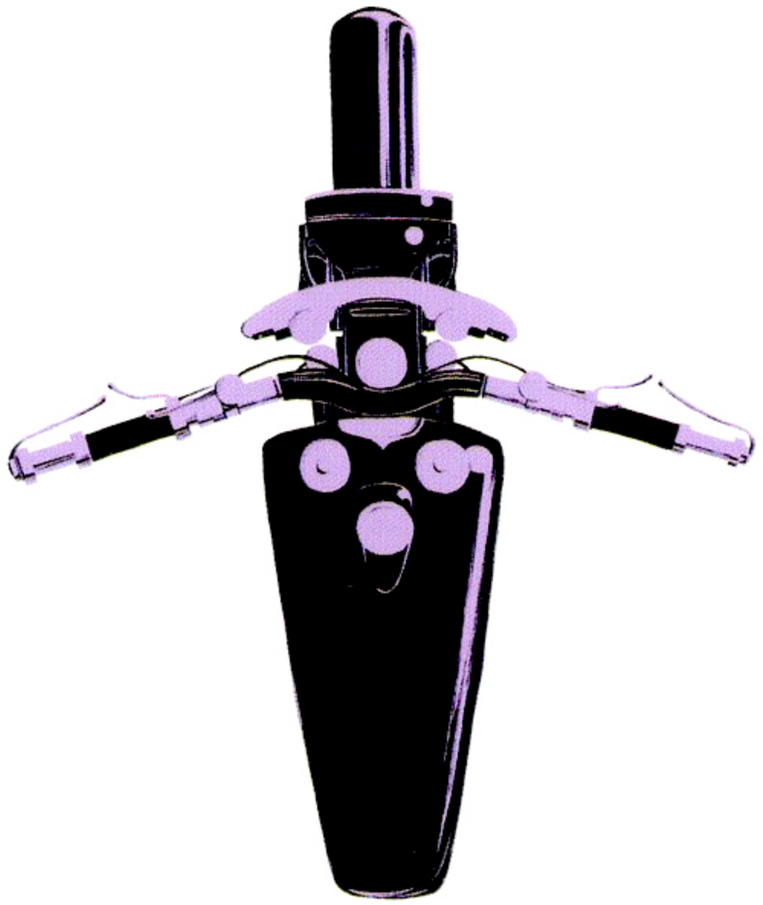


中学校卒業クラス写真
（前列左から2番目が著者）

時雨沢恵一（しぐさわけいいち）

十年前の時雨沢は、大学に入ったばかりで物を知らなくて結構毎日楽しかった。今の時雨沢は、もの書きになったばかりで物を知らなくて結構毎日楽しい。十年後の時雨沢は、どんな人間でどんなことを知らなくて結構毎日楽しいのか？　――そんなことをぼんやりと思い考えながら、今日はもう寝ます。

【電撃文庫作品】

キノの旅　the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅱ　the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅲ　the Beautiful World

イラスト：黒星紅白（くろぼしこうはく）

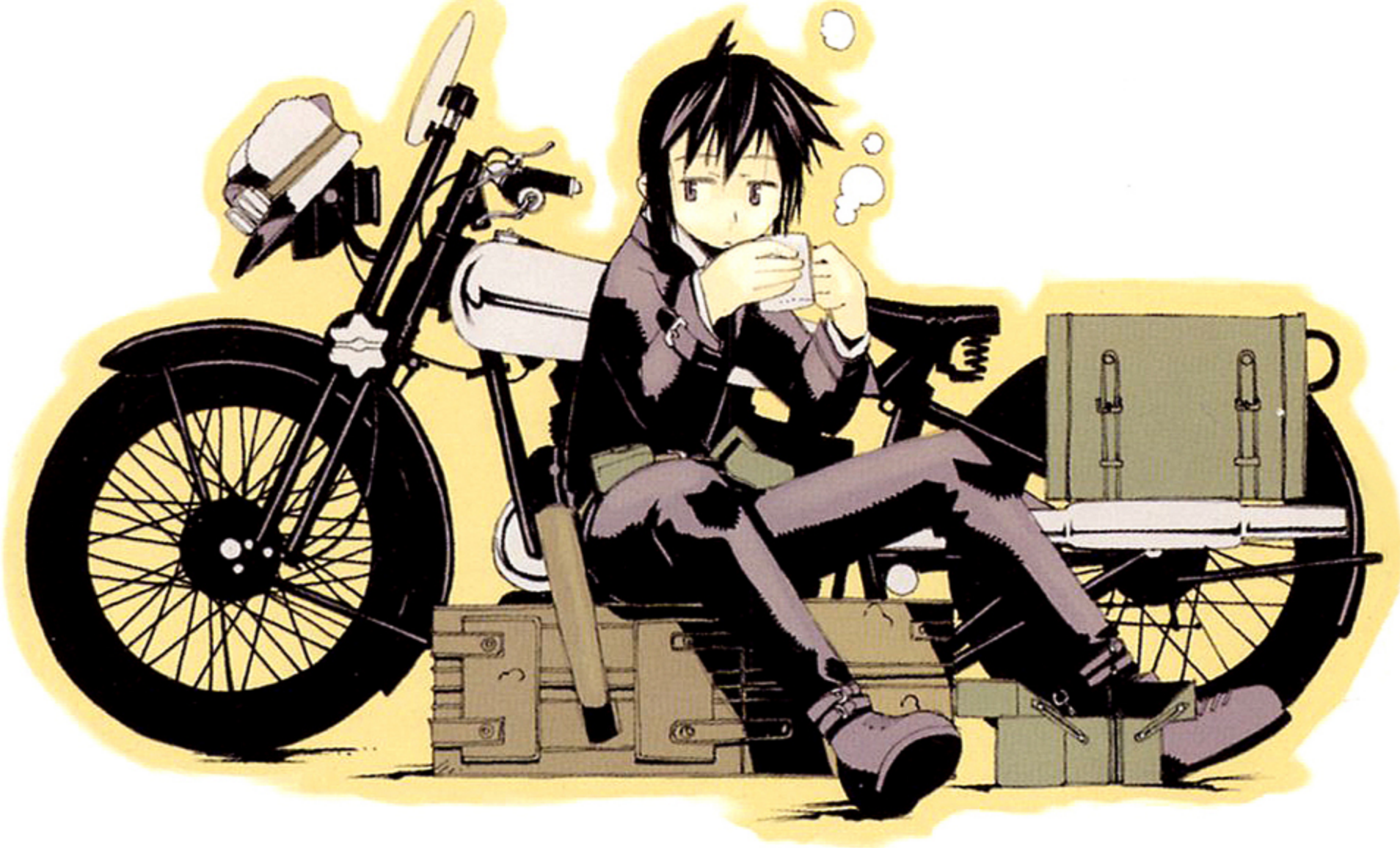
1974年生まれ。性別：男。九州在住。プレイステーションソフト「サモンナイト」のキャラクターデザインを手がける。フリーでも色々やっています。趣味：プラモデル買い、釣り。

カバー/旭印刷

キノの旅Ⅲ

— the Beautiful World —

時雨沢 恵一
KEIICHI SIGSAWA
イラスト：黒星紅白
ILLUSTRATION : KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI



「愛と平和の国」

—Power Play—

私の名前は陸、犬だ。ご主人様のシズ様と旅をしている。これは、ある時の、ある国の話だ。

「何だ、あれは？」

その国が見えて、シズ様はバギーの運転席で驚きの声を上げた。普通、国は外敵から自分達の生命や財産を守るため、城壁で囲まれている。しかしその国では、動物よけの低い木の柵しかなかった。

シズ様は指導者に会って、この国には城壁が必要ないほどの、強力無比の軍隊でもあるのかと訊ねた。指導者は、意地悪そうににやりと笑い、

「そのような野蛮なものは、我が国にはありませんなあ」

「それで、どうやって国民の安息を守る？」

シズ様が少しムキになって聞いた。

さすがは元王子様だ。

指導者は、あなたは前時代的ですなあ、とすっかり馬鹿にした口調で言った。

シズ様の、今までまったく攻撃された歴史がないのかとの質問に、

「私の体験だけでも、両手両足の指以上。しかし私達は、その全てを平和的に解決しました。まあ、これからもそうでしょうな。だから人殺しの集団も、自然景観を悪くする壁もいらないのです」

そして指導者は、怪訝そうな顔のシズ様に、胸を張ってこう言った。

「私達には、“愛と平和の歌”があるんですな。それを歌って、敵勢に闘わずして勝つのですよ」

「鍵をかけずに、用を足しているみたいだよ。落ち着かない」

この国での滞在を、そうシズ様は表現した。すぐにでも出国したがっていたが、バギーの修理のため、しばらく足止めをくっていた。

ある朝、急に国中が騒がしくなった。

平原を越えた隣国の軍勢が、しばらくぶりに攻めてきたと連絡が回った。敵軍は使者を出し、明朝総攻撃をかけると一方的に伝えたらしい。

指導者は、それはそれは楽しそうな顔をしてシズ様に会いに来て、嫌みったらしく言った。

「さて、旅人さんには、美しい光景をお見せできますな。夜が楽しみです」

夜になった。柵の向こうには、野営地の灯りが見える。手前には、広い壇が用意されて、篝火で煌々と照らされていた。腰に愛用の刀を差したシズ様は、指導者に招かれて、壇の脇の席に座った。私は、シズ様の足の間に座った。

敵軍が隊列を作り、整然と行進して、壇の前に威圧的に並んだ。

「暴力しか使えない愚劣共ですな。また私達に負けるくせに」

指導者は鼻で笑うと、部下に何か指示を出した。シズ様は、私だけにぼそっと言った。

「逃げる時は、いつもどおりに」

壇上に、人々が上った。それは、どこからどう見てもコーラス隊だった。コーラス隊らしく、指揮棒に合わせていきなり歌いだした。緩やかなメロディの、ハミング。やがて、華やかな衣装をまとった美しい女性が壇上に現れ、バックコーラスを従え、よく通るきれいな声で歌い始めた。

歌詞は、愛と平和が一番だとか、争いはとても愚かしいだとか、心の奥底の優しさだとか、武器を捨て農具を持てだとか。シズ様は、寝過ぎて頭痛がする時の顔をしていた。

突然、それまでただ眺めていた敵兵に変化が起きた。全員が武器を足下に置いて、歌に合わせて笑顔で体を動かす。歌姫に割れんばかりの声援を送り、楽しそうにはしゃぎだした。

「ご覧なさい、旅人さん。彼らはもう争いなど欲していない。愛と平和の歌に、改心させられたのです。――うむ、そうか。旅人さん、“戦争は止める。素晴らしい歌を聴いて帰る”、そう使者が伝えてきましたよ。さて、ご褒美に食事と酒でも振る舞ってやりますか。旅人さんも、腰の武器をお捨てになったらいかがですかな？」

壇上で使命感からか熱く歌う美女と、やたら盛り上がる軍服を着た観客達と、得意げに皮肉を言う指導者を前に、シズ様は何か考えていた。

翌朝、バギーの修理が終わり、シズ様と私はすぐに出発した。そして昼頃に、休憩をしていた昨日の軍勢に追いついた。パースエイダー（注・銃器のこと）を向ける兵士を睨み、シズ様は遠回しに脅す。

「私を撃つのか？　貴官の階級は最高位か？　そうでないのなら、勝手な行動を上官に咎められても知らないぞ」

五回くらいこれを言って、私達は司令官の前にいた。彼は部下の非礼を、形式上は詫びた。

シズ様が、自分達は旅人で、そしてあの国に戻るつもりは全くないと念入りに前置きして、

「あの国に攻め入るつもりなんか、最初から無かったんでしょう」

そう言った。司令官は、ニヤリと笑って、頷いた。

「ええ。あれは兵士達の慰安です。彼らに歌詞の内容は関係ないし、宣戦布告も知らない。ただ騒げればいいんです。我々の属国が、我が軍の庇護を感謝する宴を催していると教えてあります。“最初だけは静かに”ともね」

「なるほど。あなた達の本当の敵は？」

「山脈向こうの大国です。××××××などという支離滅裂な国家体制を持つ、悪の帝国です。奴らを根絶やしにするのが、我々の崇高な使命ですよ。もし奴らがあの国を侵略したら、“我等ノ属国ヲ不当ニ蹂躙シタ”として全面的に戦争が始められます。正義はこちらにありますし、勝つのもこっちですよ」

バギーに戻って、私はシズ様へ、あの軍隊の国を訪れるのか聞いた。シズ様は首を振った。

「戦争のことしか考えていない国も、戦争のことを考えていない国も、お断りだな」

「なかなか、見つかりませんね」

「ああ……。悪いな、放浪生活を長くさせて」

シズ様がハンドルに寄りかかり、蒼い空を見ながら言う。

「私は構いません。シズ様のいる場所が、

私のいる場所ですから」
正直に返すと、シズ様は助手席の私を見た。
「……」
しばらく黙っていたシズ様は、やがて、いつものように静かに微笑んで、
「行こうか」
「そうですね」
いつものようにバギーのエンジンをかけた。

（おわり）

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Do you know whether you know or not?

— Where is the terminal? —

“A Land of Love and Peace” —Power Play—

Frontispiece

"A Land of Love and Peace"

— Power Play —

My name is Riku, I am a dog. My master, Shizu, is a traveler. This is a story about a certain time in a certain country.

—

“What is that?”

From the driver’s seat of the buggy, Master Shizu sounded surprised as a country came into view. Usually a country would barricade itself with castle walls for protection against foreign enemies; however, this country had nothing but a small fence to keep animals in. Master Shizu met with the leader, and asked if there were no walls because the country had an unmatched army.

“There are no such barbaric things in our country,” said the leader with a sinister grin.

“Then how do you protect your citizens?” Master Shizu asked somewhat shamelessly — as expected of the former prince.

"You're too old fashioned," said the leader with a condescending tone.

Master Shizu asked if there had been any attacks up until now.

"Based on my personal experience, there's more than I can count on my hands and feet. Despite this, all matters were resolved peacefully, and it will stay that way. We have no need for murderous groups or walls that will hinder the natural scenery."

Then the leader said this with a dubious look on his face and with his chest stuck out,

"We have a 'Love and Peace Song'. If we sing it, we can defeat our enemies without fighting."

—

"They seem to be at ease even without gates. It's bothering."

Master Shizu's expression indicated his worry about staying for too long in this country. He had wanted to leave, but because the buggy needed repairs, we decided to stay.

One morning, the entire country was in an uproar. Word came from across the plains that a neighboring country's army would be attacking. The enemy troops sent a messenger, who informed us that a general offensive will be launched the next morning.

The leader came to see Master Shizu with a pleased face, and spoke to him with a hint of sarcasm in his tone, "Well then mister traveler, I'm going to show you a beautiful spectacle. Tonight will be fun."

—

It became night. Light from a campsite could be seen beyond the fences. On our side, a bonfire illuminated a large stage which had been prepared beforehand. Master

Shizu was beckoned by the leader, and he came, wearing his favorite sword at his side. Master Shizu sat on a chair on the side of the stage, and I settled between his legs.

The enemy troops formed its ranks and began marching until they were lined up in front of the stage.

“Look at these fools only capable of violence. And yet they will lose to us again.”

The leader scornfully laughed and gave his subordinate some instructions.

Master Shizu whispered to me, “When it’s time to run, stick to the usual plan.”

People gathered on top of the stage. No matter how you looked at it, they seemed like a chorus group. Matching the rhythm of the conductor’s baton, they suddenly began singing. It was a gently hummed melody. Before long, a beautiful woman in a flashy dress appeared on the stage. Accompanying the back chorus, a lovely voice began singing.

The lyrics were along the lines of: love and peace are best, fighting is foolish, kindness deep down in your heart, throwing away weapons and picking up farming tools in their stead, and so on. Master Shizu looked like he had overslept and had a headache.

Suddenly, the enemy soldiers who had just been staring at the spectacle started to change. Everyone put their weapons at their feet and moved to the beat of the song. The songstress had just stopped singing and was hailed with applause. Everyone joined in happily with the merrymaking.

"Take a look, mister traveler. They no longer have any interest in fighting. The 'Song of Love and Peace' changed them. Hmm… that's right. Mister traveler, our messenger relayed the following message: 'The war is over. We listened to your splendid song, and we shall now return home.' Now, shall I treat you to some food and wine? Why not also lay down your weapon, mister traveler?"

Before the beautiful woman on the altar who was singing strongly from a sense of duty, the recklessly roused onlookers in military uniforms, and the leader

triumphantly speaking in his mocking tone, Master Shizu had been thinking about something.

The next morning, the buggy's repairs were finished so Master Shizu and I quickly left. Around noon, we caught up with the soldiers from the night before who were taking a break.

Glaring at a soldier from a distance who was pointing a persuader (Note: A gun) at us, Master Shizu said,

"Are you going to shoot me? Are you in charge here? If not, doing as you please won't be good for your superior officer."

After saying this about five times, we wound up in front of the general. He formally apologized for his subordinate's impoliteness.

Master Shizu carefully introduced himself as a traveler who had no intention of ever returning to that country. And then he said,

"You were never planning to invade that country from the beginning, were you?"

The general laughed and nodded.

"Yes. That's where the soldiers relax. The lyrics have no meaning to them, and they don't know about the declaration of war either; they're just happy for an opportunity to party. We told them our vassal state was having a celebration banquet to thank us for protection, but we must be 'quiet at first'."

"I see. Then who is your real enemy?"

"A large country across the mountain range. It has incoherent national policies. They are an evil empire, and exterminating them is our noble mission. If they were to invade that country then they would be 'committing an injustice to our vassal state', and an all-out war would start. Justice is on our side though, so victory will be as well."

We returned to the buggy, and I asked Master Shizu if we will be visiting that army's country. Master Shizu shook his head.

"I'd rather go to a country that doesn't only think about war."

"Those are hard to find."

"Yeah… Sorry for making you live such a vagabond life," said Master Shizu as he leaned on the steering wheel, looking at the blue sky.

"It doesn't matter to me. Wherever Master Shizu is, I will be," I answered honestly and Master Shizu looked at me.

"……"

Master Shizu was silent for a moment, and then gently smiled as always.

“Shall we go?”

“Sounds good.”

He started the buggy’s engine as usual.

"Amidst the Clouds・b" —Blinderb—

It was completely white.

Above, below, to the right, to the left, there was only white. It was a space of nothing but the color white.

And then, the low rumble of the wind was heard; it was like the roar of a gigantic animal.

“Wait.” A voice could be heard calling out. It seemed like that of a boy.

“Can you see me?” This voice asked towards the space where nothing was visible.

“No, not at all.” Another voice immediately answered. It was a bit higher than the first voice.

“You can’t, even though we’re so close? I think it’s best if we don’t move for a while,” said the first voice. ‘Okay,’ the second voice agreed shortly, and continued,

“It’s magnificent, not being able to see anything at all,” the voice said as though its owner was having fun.

"It's magnificent to not see anything, huh?" the first voice replied.

The echo of the roaring wind grew louder for just a moment.

The other voice spoke in a lower tone, "But soon we'll be able to see again."

"We'll be able to see, huh?" said the first voice. At that time, the white world quivered. The direction in which the wind was blowing became bright for a moment.

"Hey. If you were able to see again, but there was nothing at all before your eyes, what would you do? Wouldn't you be a little happier?" the first voice asked.

"Well, yeah. But, I know something like that is impossible."

"What if things cleared up? What would you do then?"

"Well… it can't be helped that I am in this kind of place, and there's nothing I can do. I would just leave. That's all."

"There are also people who couldn't do that," the first voice said.

"Yeah…. Just one tiny bit of information — if only they knew about it even a little. If only someone somewhere told them about it. If only we arrived here one day earlier."

"Don't be so hard on yourself."

"Yeah. It's possible that there's something that I don't know as well. And in that case, I might have ended up in similar circumstances. Of course I want to avoid that, but if I don't know how, there's nothing I can do," said the voice. It paused for a moment, and then asked,

"Hey, Hermes. Would I have known?"

A response came immediately.

"Who knows?"

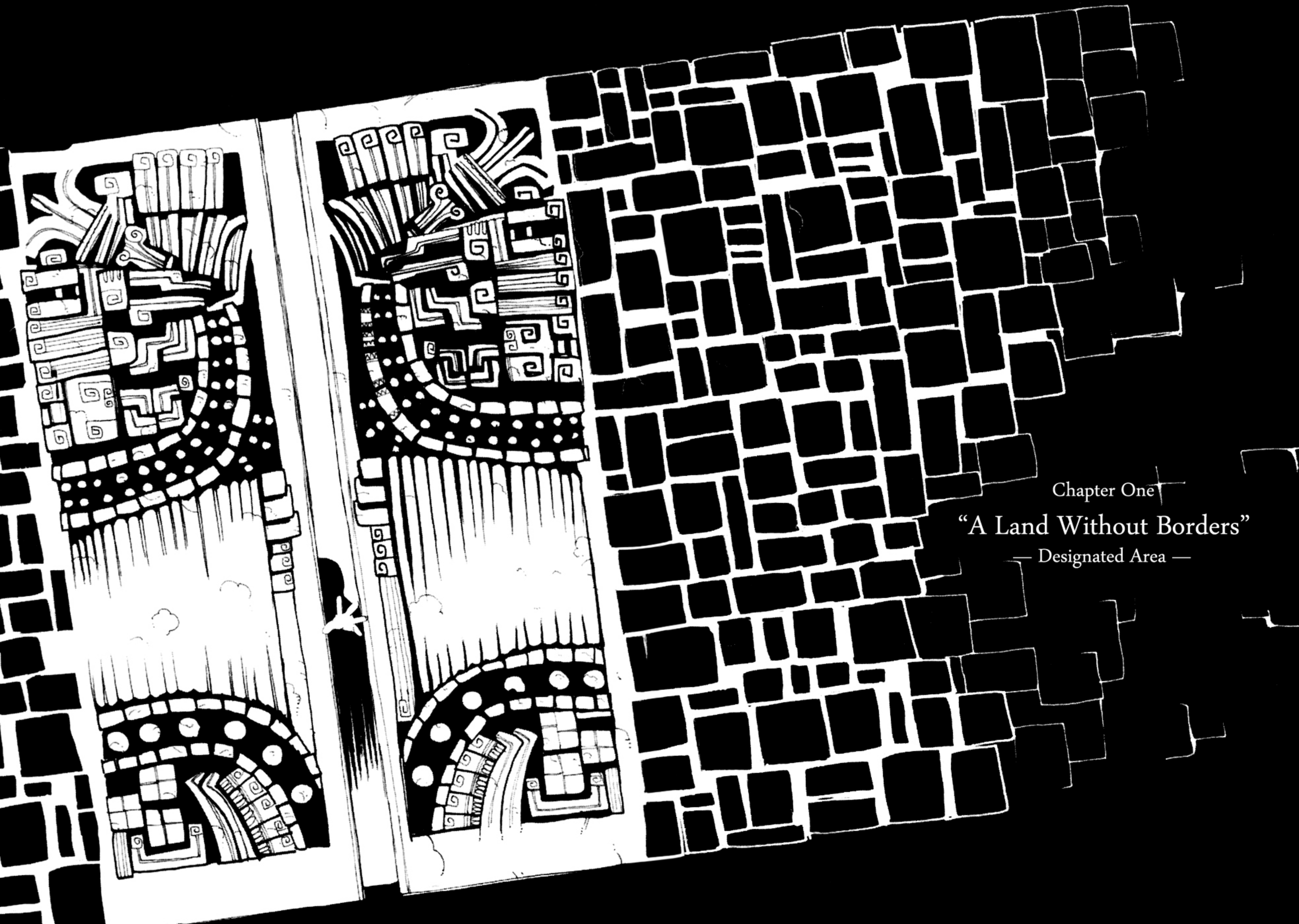
The windward brightness increased, and the white grew even lighter.

"It'll clear up soon, Kino," said the first voice.

“Yeah.”

The wind rapidly grew stronger, and with a muffled sound, the white air was blown away all at once.

"A Land Without Borders" —Designated Area—



Chapter One

"A Land Without Borders"

— Designated Area —

Across a meadow ran a single motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly).

There, nothing could be seen but the moderately wet earth, the grass across which winter was slowly beginning to spread, the sky and the clouds, and the sun. There were no mountains in the distance, and grass circled around from all sides. Ninety percent of one's vision would be occupied by the sky.

The motorrad was packed full of travel luggage. On top of the rear pipe carrier sat a large briefcase, above which several containers of water and fuel were lined up. As if cutting through it, on each side of the rear wheel was a box. A rolled-up sleeping bag was tied to the headlight.

"This is so boring…," said the motorrad.

"That's the one hundred eighty-fourth time," the rider said.

"……"

"……"

And then they both fell silent.

The rider wore a brown coat, the excess hem of which was rolled up to her thighs. She wore a brimmed hat with long flaps that covered her ears, as well as a pair of goggles. The face behind those goggles was young; the girl seemed to be in her teens. She had large eyes, and wore an intrepid expression across her face.

There wasn't anything like a path along the grassy field, so while running across the grass, avoiding the occasional bump, the motorrad casually continued along.

Eventually, the sun rose so high that the motorrad's shadow extended completely horizontal to it.

"Are we taking a break anytime soon, Kino?" the motorrad asked.

"Well," the rider named Kino spoke. "Not yet. But maybe we can stop early today, and take it easy this evening."

"Got it… but even so, this is boring," said the motorrad.

"One hundred eighty-fifth time," said Kino. Then she asked with a carefree tone, "I thought about asking you this yesterday. Do you get bored even when we're moving?"

The motorrad called Hermes replied, "That's right, especially when it's like this, where the land is all flat and we're going at the same speed, it's as if I'm on a factory roller, and it feels as though only my wheels are moving. Or rather, I feel like a mouse inside a cage."

"I see…."

"What about you, Kino? Just like this, when the scenery doesn't change a bit, doesn't it get tiring?" Hermes asked.

Kino answered, "Whether it's tiring or not, I think about other things while riding, so that notion passed me by a long time ago."

"Eh? What kinds of things? Tell me a bit about it," Hermes requested. Kino said that it will probably be uninteresting, but Hermes pressed on.

"Just now I was thinking, if I were having a knife thrust at me from the right, and I hit the attacker's hand to drop his weapon, do I make a shoulder throw, or do I twist his hand back and pin it down? Or, should I take one step back and kick his hand? Or is it better to dodge the thrust with half of my body while going for an elbow strike?"

"……"

"Those sorts of things."

"… That's not interesting."

"I told you."

The motorrad continued to run across the meadow.

"So boring…," Hermes sighed.

"One hundred eighty-six…"

Kino stopped in the middle of her utterance. She stood up while riding. 'What's wrong?' asked Hermes.

"What a surprise…"

"Hmm?"

At first, from their location, Kino and Hermes could see things that seemed like specks of trash. When they advanced further, there were several black dots in the green space below the horizon. They gradually came closer and realized that some of the dots were big while others were tiny.

Before long, they found something else. The larger things were dome-shaped tents, several of which were constructed close together. The smaller things around them were groups of livestock, and the people next to them.

Hermes whistled, "That is surprising indeed. There are people here. And cows and horses and sheep. And houses too."

"This isn't a country, is it…? They're nomads…"

"There are actually people living here. That's amazing."

Kino slowed Hermes down a little. A person on a horse turned to Kino and rode over to them. It was a young man in his prime wearing peculiarly-made clothing.

“What do you think, Kino?” Hermes asked.

“If they don’t welcome us, we’ll take a detour. I’ll talk to him first.”

Kino stopped Hermes. The man came over. He wasn’t carrying anything. With a smile, he said, “Hello, traveler. We are a clan living in these meadows.”

Kino returned the greeting. The man asked Kino where she was headed.

“A country to the west. I have no intention to get in the way of your lifestyle. I’m just passing through.”

Thereupon, the man shook his head.

“There’s no need for that, and that’s not what we want . For generations, it has been our tradition to welcome

the travelers we occasionally meet. We'll share with you our food and dwellings. By all means, please become our guest. I came as a representative of our leader."

"I see…" Kino muttered. Kino asked Hermes what to do.

"I don't mind as long as you're fine with it."

After pondering for a moment, Kino spoke to the man, "I understand. Please excuse me for the intrusion."

With a truly happy expression on his face, he exclaimed, "Then please follow me!"

He rode his horse towards the settlement. Kino launched Hermes and slowly approached.

—

In the settlement, there stood approximately twenty

portable tents. Heavy cloth covered the large, dome-shaped objects. One huge tent stood out from the rest.

An uncountable number of cows and sheep casually chewed on grass in the area near the settlement. Men riding on horses were shepherding the flocks around.

A group of about twenty people awaited Kino and Hermes. Various ages were apparent in the group, from young people under twenty to middle-aged women. About half of them have pipes stuffed in their mouths, from which smoke came out.

Before the group, Kino cut Hermes'engine and got off. Then she removed her hat and goggles.

"Hello, everyone. My name is Kino, and this here is my partner, Hermes."

"Hello there."

The oldest-looking man among the crowd, who had a pipe in his mouth with smoke rising from it, spoke, " Mister Kino, Mister Hermes. Welcome. I am the chief of

this family. Since we are constantly relocating, it is rare for us to meet a traveler. Please do relax and rest your tired body with us."

After Kino thanked him, a kind-looking middle-aged woman led her to one of the tents. Along the way, children could be seen peeking out timidly from several tents.

The tent's interior was so spacious that it seemed like several people could sleep inside it at once. Wooden frames radiating outward from a central wooden pillar supported the roof. Soft felt was laid out underfoot.

The entrance was made larger for Hermes so he could enter. When Kino heard that this tent normally served as the woman's house, but will be made into her personal quarters for a while, she voiced her thanks once more.

After the woman left, Kino removed her coat. Kino was wearing a black jacket underneath, with a belt strapped around her waist. Attached on the belt were several pouches, and on her right thigh hung a revolver-type hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a

gun. In this case a pistol). Behind her hung another weapon, a .22 caliber automatic. Kino called the revolver 'Canon' and the other 'Woodsman'.

Removing Woodsman from its holster, Kino toppled over, face up, inside the tent.

"This is comfortable," she muttered instinctively.

"It is," agreed Hermes. "If you think about it, this tent seems like it would be warm in the winter and cool during summer. See, the hems are open. It must be so that it could be put together and taken down quickly."

"In order to search for pasture, they must have to relocate plenty of times every year. The chances of us meeting them like this may be miraculous. Have they been living in this meadow, existing side by side with earth and nature their whole lives? And with no high protective wall surrounding them…" Kino said this with profound emotion.

"Are you jealous? I bet they'll be your friends if you ask."

Kino got up and spoke, "No, I'll pass. I doubt I'd fit in either."

"Well, where would you fit in?" Hermes asked.

"Is that something," Kino started, "I should look for?"

In the evening, Kino was invited to supper.

Since Hermes was asleep, Kino left him in the tent and was introduced to everyone in front of the large tent which belonged to the chief. The entire clan consisted of a little less than fifty people. There were about ten children who were no more than twelve years old.

After that, she was treated to a meal in the chief's tent. Lined up on a low and long table was a simple and frugal meal primarily made from dairy products. When Kino was asked if the food suited her tastes, she honestly replied that it was delicious.

However, because of the incessant smoking of their pipes, the inside of the tent was considerably filled with

smoke. Kino's eyes began to sting, and she asked for permission to leave. She went outside in search of fresh air.

Outside the tent, while she was looking at the burning dusk sky, someone suddenly spoke from her side.

"You are…"

Kino, startled, turned toward the voice's origin. Before her eyes, with the completely red sky set as the background, a man who appeared to be in his thirties stood. He had well-ordered features, and it may have been because he seemed so emotionless.

Kino's expression changed slightly when she saw the man.

Though he was wearing the same clothes as the rest, his eyes were of a different color – a light shade of gray. The color of his skin was also somewhat different, and he was noticeably taller than the others.

"Don't mind me," he said to Kino, who was looking at him dubiously. He continued to stare fixedly at her with his gray eyes and asked with a flat tone, "Are you the traveler who came today?"

"That's right," Kino nodded.

"Everyone thinks that you're a man. You're not, are you?"

"……. What about it?" Kino returned.

"Nothing," the man said without changing his expression.

He looked at Kino for a while longer, and then left without going into the tent.

The next day.

Kino woke up at dawn as usual. The weather was good.

When she went outside, everyone was already awake and milling about with their daily activities. A woman was milking the sheep. A young fellow was grooming a

horse. There were children helping to light a fire. Occasionally, an adult would come over to the fire to light his pipe.

When a woman who happened to pass by told Kino that it's fine if she sleeps a little longer, she replied that she was accustomed to waking up early.

The woman who had spoken to her smiled and said, " That is a very good thing."

Back inside her tent, Kino practiced drawing Canon and Woodsman. After giving them a quick tune-up, she returned them to their holsters.

After everyone had finished their tasks, they gathered in small groups in various places and began their breakfast. The meal consisted of what seemed like bread and a topping of melted cheese. Kino said that it was very delicious, and then offered them some of the clay-like portable rations she had for them to try. To this, they made a complex expression, and ended up only eating a little bit of what she gave them.

After the meal, the men mounted their horses and left to shepherd the animals. The women who were left were in charge of cleaning up, mending clothes or the tents, and looking after the children. They occasionally took a break and smoked their pipes under the blue sky.

While she was examining Hermes, Kino noticed that the children were looking on from afar.

"If you want a closer look, go ahead. He doesn't bite," said Kino.

"How rude! … But yeah, that's right."

The children approached timidly. The youngest among them were mere toddlers, while the oldest were about eleven or twelve years old. Since it was rare for them to see something like Hermes, some of them touched him with deep interest.

"Whoa, it's stiff!"

"Amazing… it's an iron horse."

"His name is Hermes," so Kino said, and immediately, cries arose from the children.

"What a weird name!"

"How strange!"

"That's a funny name!"

"Hurr-meez?" one of them asked.

"No, no! It's Hermes. Not *'hur'*, but *'her'*. It sounds weird when you say it like that!"[1]

"Hurmeeees!"

"I told you it's not *'hur'*! *'Her-mes'*!"

While the innocent children and the shameless Hermes let loose on each other, Kino noticed that a few of the children had small pipes in their mouths. Looking closer, she saw that there was no grass in them.

"What are those pipes? Do you all smoke too?" Kino asked the oldest-looking boy.

"Nah, we just have them around. Only the adults can smoke them. Because the adults work for the sake of everyone, they get to smoke as a reward. When we're recognized as adults, we get to smoke for the first time."

"Uh-huh."

"In order to be recognized as an adult, the boys have to ride horses. But not only do we have to ride them, we also need to be able to order around the flocks of animals , too."

"What about you?" Kino asked.

"I'm still in training…," the boy replied in a small voice. He then pulled out a sickle from behind his waist and said, "B-but! If it's harvesting grass, I'm the best! If my mom helps, yeah, it's the best…"

The boy said this proudly, but a girl behind him who looked about twelve said,

"Harvesting the grass is the women's work. A boy who can't ride a horse is pretty uncool."

"……"

The boy fell silent. The girl turned to Kino and said,

"I'm going to bear his children. He's going to be my husband."

"Huh…? It's already decided?" Kino asked.

"Yup. From the time I was born. That's why he has to become cool. But he's no good as he is right now," the girl said energetically as she gave a big nod.

"Pfft, whatever. You're just a tomboy," the boy sourly responded.

The girl ignored him and continued, "It's quite sad, actually. I'm better at horse-riding than him."

Kino made a wry smile.

"If that's the case, then can't you guys just exchange jobs once you're living together?"

The girl stared blankly at her for a moment, and then,

"Oh. You're right. I'll ride the horses when I grow up!"

"You can't do that. That's so dumb."

"It's fine! I've already decided. I'll go tell my father now."

"You can't."

"Can too!"

Kino followed the pair with her eyes as they chased each other in high spirits. When she turned around, Hermes was still chatting with the kids surrounding him.

"I! Told! You! It's not 'hur', it's 'her'!"

At noon, the men returned, and everyone had their lunch and afternoon naps.

After that, Kino was invited to try riding a horse. The clansmen instructed Kino, who had never ridden a horse before.

At the beginning, she was only making slow strides, but when she became used to it, she became able to ride at a fairly high speed.

Kino's brilliant riding skill was watched upon closely by the adults with admiration. The chief, with the smoking pipe in his mouth, curtly said,

"It's decided."

The adults surrounding the chief nodded in silence. From a place slightly farther away, a horseman watched this scene with his gray eyes.

—

Evening. It was after the usual meal in the smoky tent.

In front of her own tent, Kino, who was sitting on Hermes who was set on his center stand, looked up at the sky. Clouds were gathering over the western horizon, and the sunset was darkish.

"So, did they ever end up getting your name right, Hermes?"

"No… All those children still think that you told them 'Hurmees'."

Kino stifled a laugh. "… You know, when we leave tomorrow, you won't have another chance to correct them."

"I suppose so…" Hermes muttered, and continued, "It looks like the weather will be bad tomorrow, Kino."

"You're right…. Even so, we can only stay for three days."

"… Roger," said Hermes. Kino got off Hermes. Right then,

"You…"

"Whoa!"

The ashen-eyed man from the previous night had suddenly spoken up from behind. Hermes let out a yelp while Kino turned around to him with a glare.

The man took a few steps toward them. The man stood beside them and looked down on Kino and Hermes.

He asked, “Where are you from?”

Kino, without breaking her gaze on the man, shook her head.

The man asked again, “Have you decided on a country where you will be staying permanently?”

Kino spoke slowly, “I’m still… going to travel for a long time.”

The man made several small nods. He continued with his accent-free voice, “I see. You’re able to accustom yourself to that destitution you call freedom? That’s quite something.”

“……”

“What’s wrong?” the man asked Kino, who was silently staring at him.

And then Kino asked, “This may be rude, but… were you a traveler before?”

"No," the man replied immediately.

"That's a lie, isn't it?"

"Yes. It's a lie," the man replied immediately again. As if seeking confirmation, Kino slowly asked,

"You… you weren't born with these people, were you?"

"……. What about it?" the man responded and turned on his heels.

Kino followed his back with her eyes. When he could no longer be seen, Hermes asked,

"He's sharp. Just who in the world is he?"

Kino responded truthfully.

"I don't know…"

The next day, that is, the morning of the third day since Kino encountered the clan.

The sky was covered with low, heavy clouds. Though the sun had risen, the dimness of the sky hasn't changed.

After breakfast, Kino informed the chief of her intention to leave that day. With a surprised face, he asked if they had done something that displeased her.

"No. It's only because I have decided to stay for only three days in any single country…. I'm enormously grateful for your hospitality."

The chief, taken by surprise for a moment, immediately said,

"The truth is, we already planned a welcoming celebration for you, and we will be holding our first dinner party in a long time tonight. We will be choosing a cow to be slaughtered for everyone to eat, so everybody 's looking forward to it. Besides, the weather is bad, so can't you stay for one night longer?"

"……. I really thank you for taking that much trouble, but…"

Upon seeing Kino's hesitation, the woman who had lent Kino her tent spoke,

"Chief, we can start the preparations immediately. If we do that, then we'll be able to hold the party a little past noon. That way, Miss Kino could take part as well."

"Ooh, how about that?" the chief asked. Kino nodded in assent.

The chief really looked pleased and alerted everyone to the plan.

—

"—— and because of that, we will be leaving after the feast," she told Hermes while piling her luggage on him.

"Okay. Have fun."

After she had finished her preparations for departure, Kino left Hermes in the tent, put on her jacket and turned toward the chief's tent.

The sky was still covered, and there was very little light.

—

"Well, this is boring…"

Soon after Kino left, Hermes complained by himself in the tent.

Right then, the hem on the opposite side of the entrance was raised soundlessly. A man's shadow slipped inside.

"Who's there? Kino's not here right now."

"Yeah," returned a voice, its owner approaching.

"Oh, it's just the mister with the gray eyes…" Hermes said somewhat nervously. The man grabbed Hermes' handlebars, removed him from his stand, and pushed him forward.

"Well, let's go."

"Where to?" Hermes asked.

"To put it one way," the man replied, "Hell."

In the chief's tent, several long tables had been lined up, with about thirty people in all sitting around them. As usual, everyone was inseparable from their pipes, and the inside of the tent was awash with the stench of burning weed. At the center was a chunk of well-roasted beef.

Kino was offered a seat near the center of the tent, and with that, the party began. The man in charge cut up the meat into sections with a large kitchen knife. Salt and dried garlic was spread adequately across the cuts.

When Kino asked where the children and the rest of the family were, the man next to him responded,

“We couldn’t fit everyone in this tent, so they’re in a different one. Besides, there are those who have to guard the animals and look after the children. They’re taking turns doing it, you see. It’s been a long time since we’ve had meat after all. Also, it’s our custom to not let the children participate. They must be frustrated right now, and wanting to become adults sooner.”

The man whiffed a puff of smoke from his pipe and took a sip of liquid from a flask fashioned out of intestines. He offered Kino some, but when she learned that it was alcohol made from sheep’s milk, she politely declined.

“Miss traveler, how about some of this?” A woman passed a wooden cup to Kino. It had tea in it.

Kino thanked her and accepted it. Kino sniffed the tea, and then asked, “It has an interesting aroma. What kind of tea is this?”

“Huh? Um, uh… well, you see, it doesn’t have a name …,” the woman was taken slightly aback, but gave a smile and continued, “Well, go ahead and have a taste.”

Kino stared at the tea for a few moments. And then,

“I think this tea might be a bit too intense for me. I apologize, but I’ll have to decline.”

She placed the cup on the table.

The man next to Kino looked at her suspiciously.

Kino slowly stood up. “Everyone, I am very grateful for this feast, but it’s about time for me to leave.”

Every member of the family simultaneously looked at her with an astonished expression.

“Is that so? Well then, let me escort you outside,” said the woman who offered her the cup of tea.

She then led Kino toward the exit. Kino slowly turned her back, and suddenly twisted her body around.

The woman brought down a club, missing the back of Kino's head and sweeping her shoulder. Kino took a leap backwards. She kicked up the table behind her, scattering some of the food.

Everyone in the tent stood up at once. With clubs in their hands, they looked at Kino with stiff expressions. The young men blocked the only exit, and the rest surrounded Kino.

"What's the meaning of this?" Kino asked.

The chief spoke from behind, "Miss Kino. Won't you please just keep quiet and drink that tea? We don't want to give you a painful experience. We won't take your life; you just have to endure for a while."

Kino slowly turned around and questioned the chief.

"What if I refuse?"

Without answering, the chief waved his hand lightly. The sound of clubs being gripped tightly was heard.

Kino slowly pulled Canon out of the holster in her right thigh.

Everyone faltered for a moment, but soon the chief took one step closer to Kino.

“Hoho! Are you planning to use that? However, you can’t keep on firing that forever, can you? You may be able to bring down a few people, but after that, it’s over!”

“Yes, you’re absolutely right,” Kino said, and slowly returned Canon to its holster.

Several men approached Kino. Then Kino trampled violently on the end of the table by her feet.

As the men flinched from the table that flied up, Kino moved to the opposite side of the exit. She pulled out the kitchen knife still stuck in the meat and seized the nearest person ——the chief. She grasped his hair from behind with her left hand and poked his throat with the kitchen knife with her right.

“Nobody move!” Kino cried sharply. Everyone’s movements came to a complete halt.

"Y-you bastard…," the chief who was forced to face upward said in anguish.

"*I won't take your life; you just have to endure for a while*," Kino said bit by bit.

"Hah! It's futile. There's no way you'll get out of here. Your motorrad must have been destroyed by now."

"Then it's like that time…," Kino whispered absentmindedly. At the same time, she grabbed the chief's hair more fiercely, pushing the knife's blade against his throat.

Amidst his distress, the chief shouted,

"… Everyone! Even if I die, don't let her leave the tent! Don't let her take a single step outside!"

"How admirable."

Kino tossed away the knife and let go of the chief at the same time. Before the knife fell, she pulled out Canon and fired three shots in succession.

A thunderous roar echoed inside the tent. It was from the lower part of the central pillar. All three bullets hit that place, and the wood was hollowed out. While watching the men springing towards her, Kino gave the pole a violent kick, toppling it over.

The roof of the tent fell in a moment.

Kino crawled out from under the hem of the tent. Not a single soul could be seen under the dark sky; only the similar-looking tents lined up in silence.

When she looked back, she saw the adults wriggling under the flattened tent. Somebody cried out.

“Damn! Look for her! Chase her! Bring her back alive! Blood! Precious blood!”

Kino began to run to her own tent. However, when she passed through one side, a man who leaped out from there found her.

“You’re not going anywh——”

Kino shot the man’s foot. He tumbled over, shrieking in pain.

"There she is! Over there!"

Hearing someone's voice from behind her, Kino clicked her tongue.

She took a roundabout path to conceal herself among the nearby tents. At that moment, her mouth was covered violently from behind her head.

"!"

Kino flailed at her right side, pushed Canon at the chin of the person behind her, and pulled the trigger.

No bullet came out. Kino's face froze.

"Don't say a word. I'm not going to hurt you."

She heard an emotionless voice speak from behind her ear. The force restraining her mouth loosened, allowing her to turn her neck.

Ashen eyes stared back at her. His right hand gripped Canon, his thumb interposing the hammer. He slowly drew his hand away from Canon and released Kino.

"Don't use your persuader. It'll give out your location."

Kino looked up at the man.

"Aren't you going to attack me?"

"No, I won't."

Right when he said this, another man's voice was heard.

"There she is! Rauher's got her!"

Three men with clubs approached them.

"Use this. Leave two of them to me," said the ashen-eyed man called Rauher.

He handed Kino a club similar to theirs.

The three men had rushed to them unprepared, and became confused when they were attacked by Kino and Rauher.

While Kino knocked out one of the men, Rauher had beaten down the other two.

Rauher pulled a knife from his waist, and swiftly cut through their windpipes. They writhed as blood gushed out from their throats, and soon died. He then did the same with the man Kino took on.

“Why? Why is it all right with you for me to escape?”

Rauher lightly shook his head.

“I’m doing this for their sake. They’ve been living in suffering for a long time.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come over here.”

Rauher forcefully pulled Kino to a nearby tent.

“This is my tent.”

Right when Kino entered,

“Kino! You’re safe!”

"Hermes?"

Kino raised her voice without thinking. Inside the tent was Hermes, propped up on his kickstand and piled with luggage.

"I convinced him to come with me earlier. If we're in here, they won't find us for a while," Rauher said, putting a pipe in his mouth.

"Thanks for doing that. Things turned out just as you said, huh?"

"Yeah. It's just that, it was too early for this to happen. As expected of you, Kino. On top of not drinking tea, you were also able to escape from the tent," Rauher said as he lit his pipe. He was using a match from Kino's luggage.

"I'm borrowing this," he said shortly. Then he began to smoke; he seemed to find it relaxing.

"Can I question you?" Kino asked as she replaced Canon's cylinder.

"Go ahead."

"Why are they trying to attack me? Furthermore, why are you helping us?"

Rauher glanced at Kino.

"They have decided to take you in into the clan. As for the reason, it is to bring in new blood from the outside to this small tribe. They have been doing this for hundreds of years. They give passing travelers a warm welcome, and once they have appraised the person's value to be high, they take them into the family. If a person's value is low, he would be killed. They were really pleased with you. Do you get it so far?"

"Yes… but how? It didn't look like they were bowing down and begging me, though."

"With this."

Rauher held out the pipe in his right hand before Kino's eyes.

"You saw how all the adults were smoking this, right? There's a strong poison in this grass. Smoke one once and it becomes a habit. It reaches a point where you can't live without it. If you stop smoking for half a day, your head begins to hurt. Three days, and your hands start

trembling. Five days, and you start seeing hallucinations. If you hold out for ten days, you die from madness, slobbering all over yourself. That tea you refused was laced with an extract of this grass."

"If it's as you say… what would happen if I drank it?"

"You would lose consciousness right there and then; you will be bedridden, moaning nonstop for days on end . During that time, Hermes would be taken apart and scattered under the ground, and the clan would relocate. "

"……"

"I don't want to think about it," said Hermes.

"You would be smoked even through your moans, so you'll be perfectly addicted once you woke up. You won' t be able to live at all without this. The grass doesn't grow anywhere other than this field, and the only time it can be harvested is during a short period in autumn. You can either spend your life doing your compulsory duties as part of the clan, or you can die of withdrawal symptoms. It's your choice either way."

"I see. I understand very well now." Kino nodded several times. She then asked Rauher, "When did you…? "

"Five years ago. I was careless."

"How… has it been?"

Rauher gave a bitter smile, and put some more grass into his pipe.

"Ah… When I first woke up, I wondered what on earth had happened. I spat curses out, and to make things worse, the negative response from the poison was gut-wrenching. I began to familiarize myself with death. I thought for sure I was going to die."

Rauher lit his pipe and put it back in his mouth, which had curled into a smile.

"But, the woman who was attending to me, well, she was more of a young girl back then, but anyways, she said this to me: 'It's no good if you die. You can't die!' She said this to me again and again through a sea of tears , 'If you live, good things will surely happen!' Heh. That' s right."

"……"

"And so I chose to live here. I memorized my duties quickly, and I was accepted by everyone. And then… I became married to that woman. Well, it was actually decided the moment I had been 'evaluated', though."

"Were you happy?" Hermes asked.

"You could say that, I guess," he said. "That was, perhaps, the happiest time of my life."

"What happened to your wife…?" Kino asked.

"Last year, around this time, she was killed." Rauher responded with a voice devoid of emotion.

"Why was that?"

Rauher breathed a puff of smoke. Voices could be heard outside the tent.

"She's not in here either!" someone shouted as they passed by.

"It's because she couldn't bear children." Rauher answered the question.

"?"

"She bore my child, but it was miscarried. She became unable to bear another child for the rest of her life. If a woman could not produce children, she has no value. Such people are a waste of precious food and grass, a waste that they could not tolerate. Not here. Kino… don't glare at me like that."

"… Excuse me."

"So it was immediately decided, at the order of the chief, that she had to die. She accepted that, was killed, and then buried. As to where, I no longer know."

"What were you doing all that time, mister?" Hermes asked. Rauher took another huff of smoke.

"In the end, I told her the same exact thing she first said to me."

"……"

"……"

"And that's how it is."

Rauher took one last puff of smoke, tossed the ashes, and put away the pipe. And then he muttered,

"It's about time, I think."

"What?" Kino asked.

Rauher didn't answer, and moved silently to the side of the tent's entrance.

A clansman poked his head into the tent and saw Kino .

"There she is! She's here after all!" the man yelled, and in the next moment, great splashes of blood spewed forth from his throat.

Rauher went over to the man's corpse and kicked it outside.

"Well, let's go outside… it will be all right."

Rauher opened the entrance wide. Kino unfastened Hermes' kickstand, and slowly pushed him along.

Outside, all of the adults had the tent surrounded. When they saw Kino and Rauher step outside the tent, a

commotion spread across the crowd. The sky was darker than it had previously been. Hermes muttered, wondering if it would rain.

"What's going on here?" the chief asked while glaring at them.

"There's nothing to be said about it. I seem to have simply gone off and done as I wanted, Chief."

"Hand over the traveler. I'll consider your punishment later."

Rauher pulled out his pipe, then leisurely and carefully stuffed it with grass.

"Don't bother. Your time is over."

"Nonsense!" the irritated chief shouted. He issued orders to a few men holding long rods. "Attack all at once! Don't let them escape! I don't care if you have to give them a few injuries!"

Rauher struck a match. He slowly transferred the flame to his pipe——

Bam—!

A muffled explosion echoed in the settlement. The adults whirled around, and a pained scream emanated from the one who found its origin.

"F…Fire! The grass tent is burning!"

"What?!"

From a single tent, copious amounts of smoke were rising out of a hole in the roof.

"I told you. If you don't do something fast, everything is going to burn up," Rauher said while taking a smoke.

Everyone's faces became pale. They rushed toward the burning tent, as if they have completely forgotten about Kino and Rauher.

The smoke from the tent began to rise with increased vigor, and flames could be seen flickering from inside.

"The grass! The *grass!*"

"The grass of life!"

"Put out the fire! Put it out somehow!"

Rauher, Kino, and Hermes watched on from behind as the people screamed madly.

They hit the fire with their clubs and whacked it with their clothes, but their desperate attempts to put out the fire were entirely ineffective. The fire, unrestrained, grew more furious.

“That was the tent where all the grass that they’ve saved from last year was stored. I rigged it earlier. I asked Hermes if I could use a little bit of oil and gunpowder. ——Without that grass, everyone’s got ten days left to live,” said Rauher. Kino turned to face him.

“Including me.” Rauher breathed a puff of smoke.

The fire grew more and more, and the flames shined on the figures of the people surrounding it.

One man moved closer to the fire, resolving to salvage some grass. The sleeves of his clothes and his hair caught fire, and soon, his whole body was lapped up in flames.

The man danced, engulfed by fire, screaming an otherworldly scream all the while. No one helped him, and he eventually danced his last and fell down. There were several more people whose bodies caught fire.

The faces of numerous people desperately trying to put out the fire turned a ghastly pale as they collapsed from suffocation.

As people were tossed out of the way or stepped upon, the futile fire-dousing operation continued.

The roof of the tent fell. As the flames engulfed the entirety of the grass, the smoke grew more tempestuous. White smoke signals flared upward.

Kino gazed at the depressing situation before her as she watched person after person collapse. Others desperately breathed in all the smoke they could, thrusting their faces deep into the fumes. White foam began to appear from their mouths as they staggered, making strange shrieks before fainting.

Finally, the tent and the grass had burned down entirely. Around the burned wreckage, the motionless bodies of several people tumbled about.

The people who could still move ended themselves.

Suddenly, a man grabbed the neck of a nearby woman and pinned her to the ground, choking her to death.

Then, he began to bludgeon to death the people cowering around him. As the sound of heads splitting open could be heard, the number of motionless people increased. There were also people who burned as they set themselves on fire.

One man tottered towards Kino. Both of his hands had been turned into charcoal.

"Heheheh…"

The man laughed, and then closed his hollowed eyes. Rauher slashed at his throat in a moment.

And then, Rauher moved closer to the charred ruin, putting the others out of their misery: the people who sank down the floor, those who were weeping, laughing, or embracing each other, those with foams coming out of their mouths, those who were bludgeoned to death, and those who were burned halfway through.

He impassively stabbed his knife into their necks. Slowly, the number of the living decreased.

"Y-you… what are you…"

The last remaining person, the one once called the chief, spoke to Rauher, who was standing before his eyes.

"One year ago, if you hadn't done that, maybe there would have been another way…"

The man with the bloodstained knife looked back at him with his ashen eyes.

The chief held his head in his hands and muttered as he tore at his hair.

"Ooh… it's the end… it's the end of everything…"

Rauher shook his head sideways.

"No. Not everything. Goodbye, father."

With the knife remaining in the neck of the chief, Rauher turned around. Kino and Hermes looked on as he came over to them.

"Hell has ended. You can go now."

"Let's go together. Gather up as much of the remaining grass from everybody's pockets, and go to some country nearby. Maybe somehow, the poison will be released from you. If you're just going to die by staying here, why don't you try what little possibility there is?"

The man looked at Kino and muttered, "Maybe that's what would be good…." Then, he clearly said, "But I'm staying here."

"Why? … There's nobody here anymore," Kino said.

Rauher smiled.

"Have you forgotten?"

"?"

"The children."

"Oh!"

"Not everything has ended."

"……"

"I'll explain to them what the adults did, what they were smoking, and why I did this. Also, I'll teach them how they could live on their own, until I die of madness. Yes, I have to show them that death as well. If I can do that, they should be able to use the remaining animals and survive. They should be able to make a new future, one without smoke. That's why I'm… staying here."

"… I understand," Kino gave a small nod. And then she asked, "Where are you from? If it's a place I pass by …"

Rauher shook his head.

"There's no need for that, and it's better if you don't do something like that. In the country I was born in, I was a murderer."

"……"

"What did you do? Since this is the end, tell us."

Hermes said this with emphasis on 'since this is the end'. Rauher gave a sad smile.

"The end, huh…? I was a soldier then. Ever since I was a little kid, I received special training. When war came, I assassinated lots of enemies. I thought I had killed for the country's sake, for everyone's sake. But, after the war, I became a nuisance. For a country that has won a fight in the name of justice, it couldn't be said publicly that an assassin took lives in its place. As a broken-down, murderous demon whose usefulness had expired, I was expelled from the country. I didn't want to go on a journey or anything like that. I wanted to spend my whole life in the place I was born in. I wanted to build my family and live a normal life there. When I came upon these people, I wondered if I could start from scratch."

"… I see. Thank you so much," said Hermes.

"Don't mention it," replied Rauher.

Kino remained silent, putting on her coat, pulling her hat and goggles on. As she was about to start Hermes' engine,

"You look a lot like her," Rauher said suddenly.

"Huh?"

"You asked me why I helped you earlier, right? I still haven't answered you. It's because you reminded me so much of her. No, not your face, but your eyes… Your eyes are so much like hers. They're exactly the same."

Rauher slowly narrowed his ashen eyes.

"Your… wife?" Kino asked. Rauher nodded.

"Yes. Even now, it's like a dream."

"……. By any chance, if I was taken into the family, would I have been made your wife?"

"That's right."

"……"

"This is goodbye. I was really glad that I met you." Saying this, Rauher turned his back to Kino.

"I won't ever forget that you saved me for the rest of my life… goodbye," Kino said to the man walking away from her.

The man didn't turn around; he simply, lightly, waved his hand.

—

The sound of a motorrad's engine echoed throughout the settlement, and then it was gone.

The children where shuddering in one tent. Finally, the entrance opened, and an ashen-eyed man entered. He told them that he had something to tell them. He said that it was something very important, something he wanted all of them to hear.

The children slowly gathered around the man in a circle. The man surveyed each of the children. He opened

his mouth, but in that instant, a sickle was stabbed into his throat, and not a sound came out of it.

'I saw you! You're the enemy of everyone!' someone said. The man tried to say something, desperately moving his mouth, but no voice came out, and he finally died.

The children went outside of the tent. And then they cried. When they grew tired of crying, someone spoke up .

'From now on, we have to live on our own.'

Everyone nodded.

'From now on, we have to do everything that the adults did.'

Everyone nodded.

In the tent of the chief, the children searched for anything useful. Someone found a bag with lots of ' strange things' in it, and everyone looked.

It was grass. Nobody recognized it, but it was the grass that the chief had stored up for use in times of emergency. There was a considerable quantity of grass.

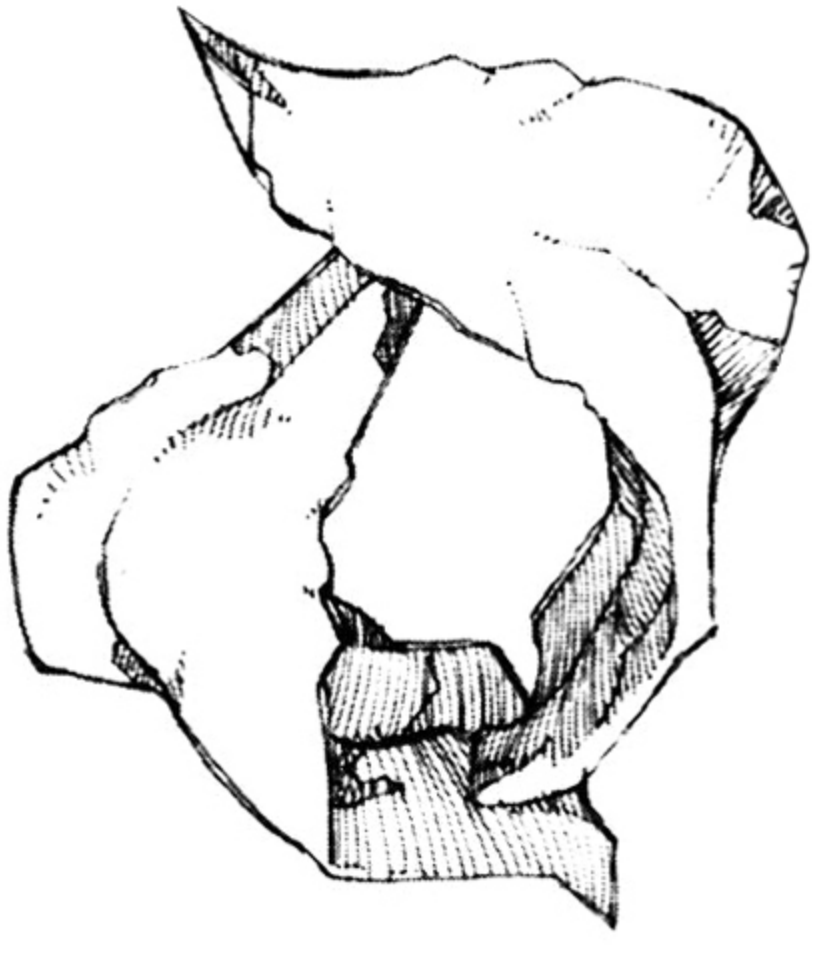
Someone realized that this must be what all the adults were smoking, and suggested that they try smoking it.

'That's only for the adults!' someone scolded. But then, someone said,

"We are now the adults. And so, these are our rewards ."

This view became accepted, and every one of them put a pipe in their mouth and began to smoke. At first, it gave some of them an awful sensation, and found it sickening, but in order to become adults, they endured.

Half a month later, this family——

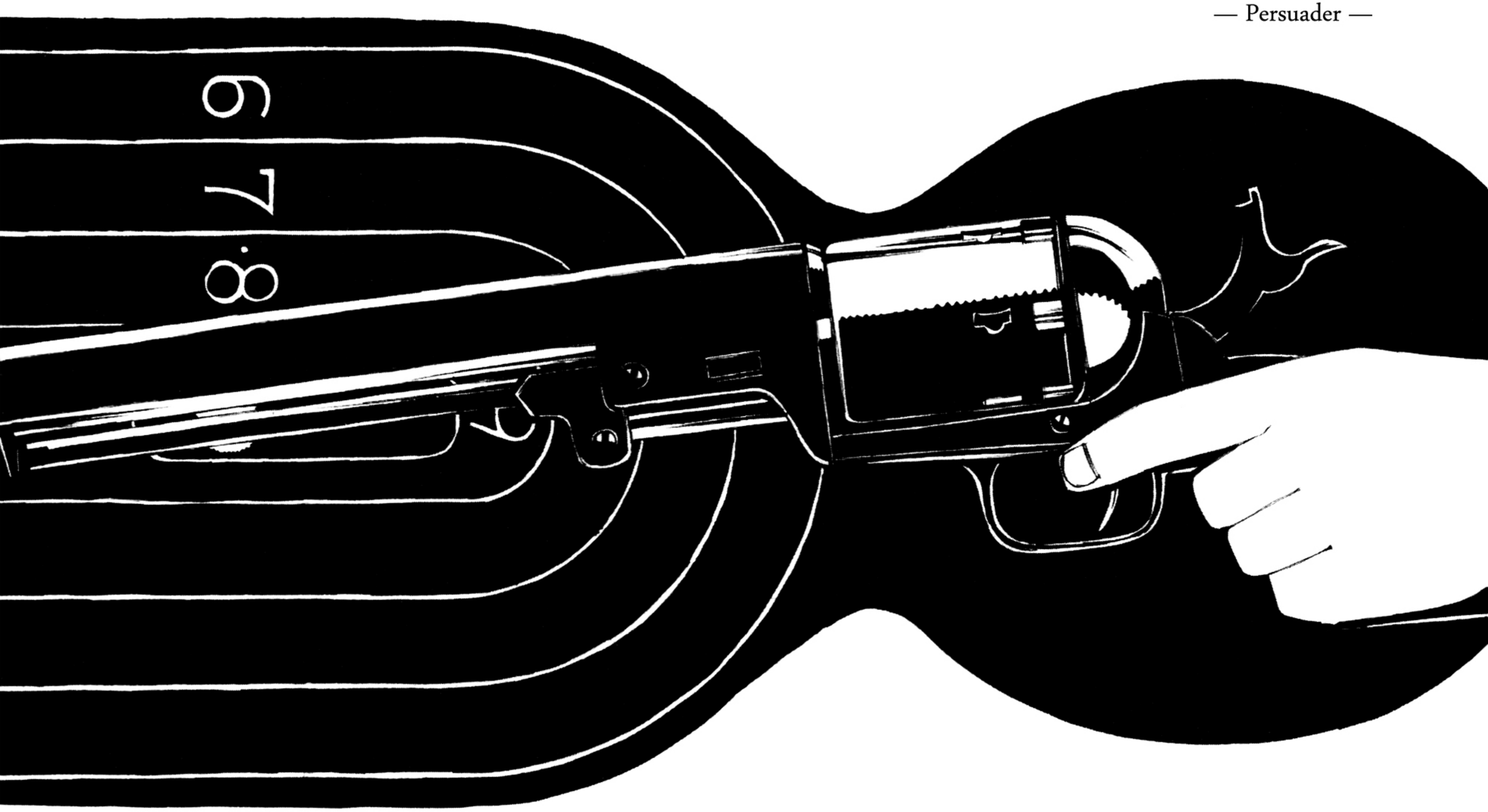


"Power of Persuasion" —Persuader—

Chapter Two

"Power of Persuasion"

— Persuader —



It was a tall, dense forest where a variety of grass and trees flourished. The afternoon light peeked faintly through the gaps between the fresh green leaves. The soft chirping of birds could be heard.

A deer and its young chewed on a row of grass, slowly savoring the meal.

Suddenly, the parent deer raised its head. Its offspring was still engrossed with the grass. Along with the sound of grass being brushed away, a human suddenly leaped out from a thicket.

The deer, startled, became petrified. The human, also startled, aimed the persuader (Note: A gun) she was holding towards these figures.

It was a young person. She seemed about halfway through her teens, or perhaps a bit less. She had on blue trousers covered with dirt and a somewhat thick, green-colored jacket. She wore a brimmed hat with flaps that covered her ears, and for some reason there were goggles over her eyes. The expression behind the goggles was rigid, and she appeared fearful.

The human, watching the deer disappear, let out a breath. After a short break, she ran off once again. The persuader she held was a slide-action shotgun, with a tubular magazine attached underneath the barrel.

After running for a bit, the human concealed herself by sliding behind a thick tree. Immediately, she aimed her persuader in the direction from which she had come. Opening her large eyes wider, subduing her breath, she searched for something.

Finally, a thicket rustled softly. The human reflexively aimed at it and fired. With a thunderous roar, the grass of the thicket danced wildly. There was no one there.

The human clicked her tongue without raising her voice and fled from behind the tree. With her left hand, she slid the fore grip underneath the barrel back and forth. A spent shell flied out and the next charge was loaded.

Holding her head low, she ran desperately without looking behind her. After jumping over several bushes, she hid herself just as she had done earlier. Her breathing became rough.

She hurriedly wiped the sweat off of her eyelids and touched the lens of her goggles with the back of her hand . Without realizing, she repeated this action several times

Suddenly, the face behind the lens slackened.

"'Settle down, Kino. Always be calm. Save your nervousness and fear for later.'"

The human, as though someone was instructing her, muttered with a soft voice.

The human who called herself Kino, smiling softly, grasped her persuader again. She produced a single round from the pouch on her waist, and inserted it inside the magazine.

Holding her persuader reverently in both hands, Kino closed her eyes. She seemed to be in a meditative state under the shadow of the tree.

Several seconds passed in silence as she remained there, unmoving.

Rustle.

From a place not far from where she was, the sound of something lightly stepping through grass could be heard.

Rustle. It sounded. The small sound became louder.

Rustle. Again. It came closer and closer.

Rustle. One more time. Kino slowly opened her eyes.

Upon hearing the next sound, Kino pointed her persuader in the direction it came from. She fired.

The shot only went through the blades of grass. A little to the left, the thicket quivered. Kino loaded the next round and aimed. The moment she was about to fire, a person's hand appeared in the shadow of a tree to the right, aiming a hand persuader towards her. Kino frantically shifted her aim, and was shot at just before she was able to perceive the line of fire.

The bullet hit her hat on the part where her forehead should be, and bound back. It hit the branch of a neighboring tree, bounced, and fell on top of the ground a bit ways off. It was a spherical rubber bullet, with a diameter of about ten millimeters.

"How are you doing, Kino?"

Asking this, the human who had shot Kino appeared from behind the tree.

It was an old woman with a smile lingering on her face . She had a slender body and her silver hair was neatly tied behind. She had slim trousers on, and wore a light green cardigan above her shirt. She had goggles just like Kino. In her right hand was a high-caliber revolver.

"It hurts. But if I have to be specific, I'm frustrated."

Kino was still pressing on her head, and answered with only her gaze raised.

The old woman took off Kino's hat and goggles. The skin was torn a little bit on her forehead, and a small amount of blood was flowing out. From Kino's jacket pocket, the old woman took out a small cloth and a tiny bottle of antiseptic solution. She wet the cloth with the solution and attached it to Kino's forehead with tape.

"Since you're still young, you've got to take care of your face," said the old woman with a kind smile.

—

There was a narrow path in the forest. There, a motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) was propped up on its center stand. It called out to Kino and the old woman as they parted the grass on their way out.

"Welcome back!"

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, Hermes."

The motorrad asked but one word to the old woman regarding Kino, who wore a heavy expression.

"Where?"

Kino, not saying anything, pointed to her forehead.

"Well, you still have a long way to go. Now, let's go home and make something to eat."

Saying this, the old woman put away her revolver in a handbag resting on Hermes.

As Kino passed her persuader to the old woman, she climbed onto Hermes and turned on the engine. Its blaring roar echoed through the forest.

The old woman sat sideways on a cushion spread across the rear carrier. Kino then slowly launched Hermes off.

“Kinooo, it’s no good to be depressed like that,” said Hermes as they ran. Kino remained silent despite Hermes’ words. The old woman only looked behind them with a nonchalant expression.

—

After running for a while, Kino suddenly stopped Hermes.

“Three people, huh?” Hermes said with a small voice. There was the usual path surrounded by the forest. However, a bit further ahead, one side of the path was cleared to give way to a field. Up ahead, a small house could be narrowly seen.

Kino turned to the old woman and asked,

“Is the gunpowder seller coming today?”

The old woman shook her head.

“No. There’s no such plan. … Kino, get down.”

“Huh?”

“On my signal, restrain the movements of those people . I will speak to them alone first.”

The old woman handed Kino the persuader that she had used earlier.

“No way…. I don’t think I can do it.”

“If something happens, then, and only then, will I help you. This is good training.”

“But…”

“Kino. Didn’t you say that you want to become stronger?” said the old woman to the hesitant Kino, a smile across her face.

"… Yes."

Kino grasped the persuader, and nimbly disappeared into the forest.

As the old woman sat on the rider's seat of Hermes and gripped his handlebars, Hermes spoke with a feeble voice, "Um… please don't knock me over, okay?"

The old woman nodded several times. Holding the levers in her hands on both sides, she said, "Don't worry, I still remember. This one's the brake, and this one's the clutch."

"It's the other way around…"

There was a small log house in the middle of the forest and the garden.

In front of the entrance, there were three men. No matter how you look at them, they appear to be thieves

— a fat man, a thin man, and a man with a scar on his face. They were each holding long, rifle-type persuaders. The horses they had ridden were tied to the entrance.

The men heard the roar of a vehicle's engine, and soon saw an old woman riding unsteadily on a motorrad. They gave a hefty sigh.

The woman somehow managed to stop Hermes in front of the house and the three men.

"No, that's not how you do it! Put the kickstand down with that foot…"

"This one? Oh, this protrusion. Now I remember."

"That's right. Ah, but the ground is weak… use the center sta…"

"Here you go."

The old woman finally managed to put out the side stand, picked up her handbag and dismounted. The side stand slowly sank into the ground and Hermes collapsed to the side.

"Horrible…"

One of the thieves stepped forward.

"Is this your place, old lady?" he asked in a loud, crude voice.

The old woman bowed,

"It's rare for us to have visitors. Come in and I'll make you some tea."

The thieves snorted.

"Tea would be great, since, after all, we'll be taking all that you have that's of any value! If you do as we say, maybe we'll spare you your life. Or else——"

"Or else what?"

"We'll beat you up in this place and you'll expose the air to the stench of your putrid corpse."

"You are threatening me, are you not?" the woman asked as if seeking confirmation, and the thief answered with a hoarse voice,

"That's right! Old lady, is your Alzheimer's kicking in? Can you even hear me?"

The old woman put her handbag in front of her.

“I can hear you. ——Kino, do it.”

Kino jumped out from the forest and fired. A rubber bullet hit the fat man squarely in the head, and he fell over sideways. Crashing into the tall man’s chest, she hit him hard in his nether region with the stock of her persuader, then whirled around and delivered an uppercut to his jaw. Using the fallen body as a shield, Kino went for the last man, shooting both of his hands.

“Ugh… huh?”

Dropping his weapon and grabbing his pained hands, the man with a scar on his face let out a yell. His two partners were lying horizontally on the ground, completely unconscious.

Kino continued to aim at the man carefully. To his side , the old woman spoke.

“Hey…”

“Wah!” the man winced.

"Don't be afraid, we won't take your lives. Instead…"

"Y-yes…?"

"Please take out anything of value that you have."

"Huh?"

"If you've done other jobs before this, you must have something, right? So, like I said, give me your valuables please. Or else…"

"… O-or else what?"

The old woman gave him a sweet smile.

"Oh my, you must know, don't you?"

Seeing the man nod over and over, Hermes, still on the ground, muttered,

"Demon…"

"If you go on from here for about half a day, you should be able to see a river. It's pretty shallow, so I'm sure you can cross with a horse. ——But, until you reach that place, you must never look back."

Listening to these last few words of the old woman, the pale-faced thieves took their leave.

Her face filled with curiosity, Kino followed them with her eyes.

The old woman, who was carrying a bread basket full of gems and bracelets, spoke to Kino, "You did wonderfully. Well, let's prepare some food."

Kino looked at the old woman and nodded.

As the two turned on their heels and were about to enter the house, Hermes spoke.

"Pick me up first…"

It was evening inside the forest.

Kino went out from the back of the house, holding an adze. Hermes was propped up next to the window.

In a nearby clearing, there was a mountain of firewood yet to be chopped, and a tree stump cut down obliquely, its tree rings facing towards the house.

“Hey, Hermes.”

Kino spoke suddenly as she selected several pieces of firewood.

“Yeah?”

“If those thieves are so weak, why were they going around stealing stuff?”

“……”

“I don’t really want to say this, but… was I really in any danger?”

"… Well, it doesn't mean that those guys are particularly weak…," Hermes said in a low voice to Kino who had a doubtful look on her face.

"Huh?"

Kino turned around. There was a small bruise on her forehead.

"No, it's nothing. More than that, just hurry and finish chopping the wood."

"Okay."

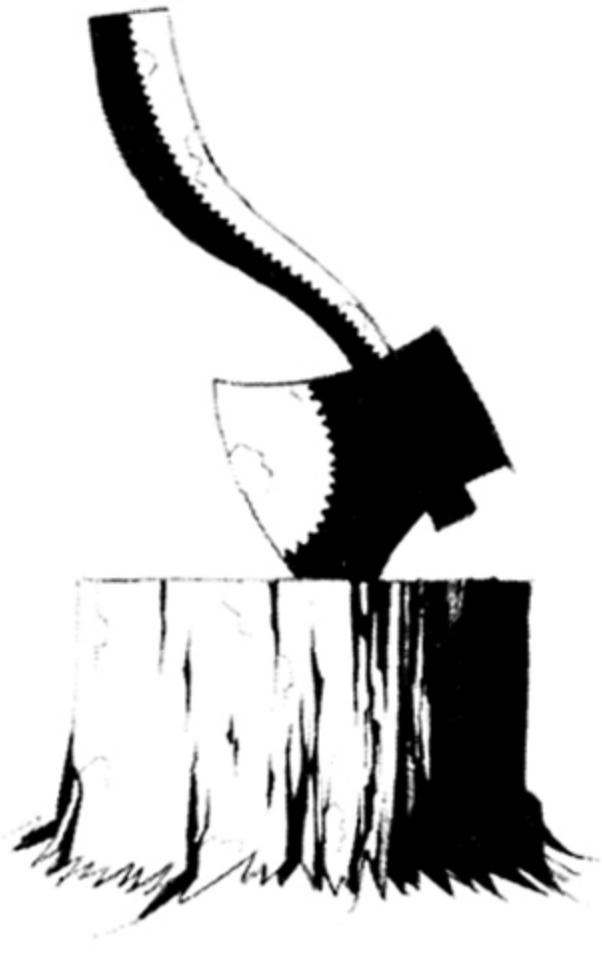
Kino placed the firewood on the slanted tree stump.

She went over to where Hermes was, and picked the adze back up.

"Hup!"

She threw it at the firewood.

The adze spun twice in midair, and cut the firewood clean in half.



“Land of Identical Faces” —HACCP—[2]

Chapter Three

"The Land of Identical Faces"

— HACCP—

It was as if the place was filled with low tables.

Amidst a land of brown earth and stone, there were numerous hills with flat summits. In between the hills were marks of rain carving out a formerly level land. In addition to this, weathering has flattened out the bottoms of the valleys. In the valleys and hills, not a single blade of grass grew.

The sky was blue, and it seemed transparent. In the higher areas, thin lines of clouds flowed.

There was a single path. It can only be seen as a white line from afar; it runs flat as it rose through the hills, and still runs flat as it descended into the valleys.

Kicking up dry dust, a single motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) ran.

The motorrad was fully loaded with traveling luggage. There were boxes attached to both sides of the rear wheel , and there was a large suitcase and a sleeping bag fastened to its top. To the side hung a small silver cup, dancing.

The rider was wearing a brown coat, the long hem of which was wrapped up to her thighs. She was wearing a hat with flaps that covered her ears, as well as goggles. She had a bandana around her face to protect it from the dust.

The motorrad climbed up the slopes of a hill, and soon ran atop the tables made by nature. When she was about to approach the downward slope, the rider suddenly stopped the motorrad. She slightly locked the rear wheels and let it slide. The dust wrapped around the motorrad and the rider, and soon cleared up.

"Can you see it, Hermes?" said the rider, pulling her bandana down. It was a young face. She was around her teens.

The motorrad called Hermes responded, "Yup, I see it. It's pretty amazing."

"Yeah," the rider nodded.

They were looking down on a valley whose width was incomparable to the others. The hill on the other side could barely be seen at all. And in the center of that valley, there was a country.

The tall walls were built around the country in an enormous circle. At its center, large cluster of buildings and the streets lined up within them could be seen. A vivid green forest surrounded the country. Spread across the forest were several ponds filled with bright green water.

A brown wilderness and a green forest. The interior and the periphery of this circle were two completely different worlds.

“Kino, what is that water?” Hermes asked. The rider called Kino responded.

“Probably underground waterway pulses. The enormous river formed by this valley must still be flowing in places deep underground.”

“Ooh, I see. Let’s hurry and visit the place! I’m really interested in seeing an amazing country located in such an amazing place,” Hermes said happily.

“Me too.” Kino put her bandana back on.

She launched Hermes and descended into the valley in high spirits.

—

Someone was peering at Kino and Hermes from far, far away through a pair of high-magnification binoculars. They dug a hole in the ground and covered it with a cloth of the same color.

That someone clicked his tongue. “This is bad…. They’re going to enter that country.”

Someone next to that person asked, “It’s a traveler, right? Do you think they’re not aware of the horrors that await them in that country?”

The first person slightly stiffened his voice and spat, “ Who on earth would enter if they knew…? The person continued,

“Sergeant, get in touch with headquarters. Tell them we’re in a state of emergency.”

The gate on this country’s walls was only located in one place. Kino went around the wall until she reached the other side.

In front of the gate was a small guardroom, in which a young man and a young woman served as both guards and immigration examiners.

Kino informed the examiners that she was entering the country for a three-day period for the purpose of sightseeing and recreation. The examiners told her that there was one condition.

“Before entering the country, you will have to undergo a blood inspection, Miss Kino. This is in order to ensure that you will not bring in any dangerous diseases. The inspection will take a little bit of your time. Do you accept this?”

Kino asked what she would specifically have to do, and the examiner replied that they will be taking a sample of blood from her arm with a needle.

"……"

Seeing from her silence that she was conflicted, Hermes spoke up. "What's wrong Kino? … Don't tell me you're afraid of needles, hm?"

"It's nothing like that at all!" was her immediate response. She politely let the examiner lead her, and then disappeared into the interior of the guardroom.

After a while, Kino came out with a tired face.

"No matter how many times I do this, I still couldn't stand it…" she muttered in a small voice to herself.

The sun was slowly, but steadily setting.

"I'm sorry, but it will take quite some time," said the male examiner to Kino, who was absentmindedly sitting on Hermes.

After a long wait, when the sun had completely set, the examiner came out of the gatehouse.

"The results of the inspection are in. It's okay for you to enter. Thank you for waiting."

Kino struck the sleeping Hermes awake. With the saluting examiner behind them, she passed through the gates pushing Hermes along.

When they entered the country, they were greeted with a forest spreading out before them in the dim shadow of the wall. A large car was parked in front of Kino and Hermes, and there were several people who seemed to have been waiting for them. There was one man and one woman, along with two younger women.

"Welcome, miss traveler. We have been waiting for you. Since it's quite late already, we will lead you to the hotel by car."

After being told such, Kino was about to thank the man when she caught a glimpse of his face. She was startled.

It was the examiner who had been at the gate before.

"No… It can't be…," Kino muttered under her breath. No matter how she looked at him, it was evident that the man before her was over fifty years old. It was a different person.

Kino expressed her thanks to this man, and turned to the woman beside him. She became speechless.

The middle-aged woman had the exact same face as the female examiner, but her age was obviously greater. However, the two people behind them were, aside from the clothes, exactly the same as the female examiner. Standing there were two of the same person. With a smile, the middle aged woman informed her that they were the managers of the hotel. She introduced the two young women, who, apparently, were their daughters. Upon hearing this,

"Thank you… very much…" Kino said with a wholly confused expression. They took Kino and Hermes into their car and drove off to the hotel.

On the way, the middle-aged woman spoke to Kino. " Sorry about the long wait you had to endure. The immigration rules in this country are much stricter than those of other countries. Despite that, I hope you enjoy your stay."

Kino gave half-hearted replies to the rest of the conversation.

—

After arriving at the hotel, Kino and Hermes were led into the lobby. It was a splendid and pretty hotel, but there were no other guests to be seen. At the front desk was a lone young man in a business suit, with the exact same face as the examiner. Only his hairstyle and way of speaking were different.

Two bellboy-looking youths expressly removed Kino’s luggage from Hermes and carried it off. They both had the same face as the examiner and the man at the front desk.

“……”

The wordless Kino and Hermes were led into a large room. Kino asked the bellboy who led her into the room how much it would cost her to stay.

“For guests from the outside, it’s completely free. Please, take it easy. If there’s anything you need, call us anytime with the signal bell.”

He bowed and left.

After the door closed, Kino spent a while thinking, and then stood up.

“Hey, Hermes.”

“Hmm?”

Kino made sure that no one else was in the room, and then asked, “Haven’t you noticed anything strange about everyone we’ve met today? The examiner, the man at the front desk, the bellboy, and then the owner and his family? They’re all the same. And the women, too. At first I thought they were triplets, but then…”

“Maybe, but aren’t you thinking about it too much?”

“But…”

“Everyone in this country probably have the same face . Maybe you didn’t see when we were outside, but all the people walking, man or woman, had the same face,” Hermes said nonchalantly. Kino stopped her hand as she was taking off her coat.

"But… how?" Kino asked, considerably puzzled.

"Uh… hmm…" Hermes thought for a moment.

"Maybe they're all made in the same assembly line from the same factory? If that's the case, then it's not really strange, is it?" he then said in his usual tone.

"……"

While folding her coat, Kino looked at Hermes with a shocked face.

"What? Why are you making that face?"

"… Today tired me out, so I'm going to sleep now. Maybe we can see tomorrow if it wouldn't be too rude to ask them about it."

"Okay!"

Kino unfastened her waist belt and removed the black jacket she was wearing. At the same time, she also removed the holster of her hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun, in this case, a pistol).

Kino took a shower. Then she lay on her side on the neat bed and fell asleep instantly.

—

The morning of the next day, Kino woke up at dawn. The weather was good.

She practiced with her persuaders for a while, and then performed maintenance on them. She then did some light exercise.

When the sun fully rose, she looked outside through the window and saw the pretty townscape and green trees.

In her room, Kino ate her breakfast. Just as before, the bellboy, the man at the front desk, and the chef who prepared her meal in front of her all had the exact same face.

—

After breakfast, Kino woke Hermes up, put on her jacket, and went downstairs to the lobby.

Outside of the hotel, there were about twenty people. Kino and Hermes observed them beyond the glass windows. Their ages were different, but every man and woman had the same face.

Hermes asked Kino, “Aren’t you surprised?”

Kino shook her head lightly. “… I’ve already gotten used to it.”

“Really now.”

The hotel owner was leading a man who looked to be around his late thirties. He had the same face as everybody else.

“Good morning, Miss Kino, Mister Hermes. I’m from the town hall. In case you need one, I came to be your tour guide. How does that sound? I can answer any question you have about this country.”

"Thank you very much. I'll take you up on your offer …. There's one question I would like to ask right away," said Kino to the guide.

"Yes, what is it… is what I would like to say, but the truth is I already know what your question will be… ' Why does everyone here have the same face?' am I right? " the guide said with a smile.

Kino nodded. The guide also nodded.

"I will explain everything. At the same time, there is also a place I would like to show you. Please come with me into the car."

—

Followed by several identical smiles, Kino and Hermes got into the car.

Soon they arrived at a large, square building with white walls and no windows.

When they entered, they were led into a classy-looking reception office. Kino sat in a chair, and Hermes stood on his kickstand beside her.

"We formally welcome you to our country. With that, I will proceed to answer your question from earlier."

The guide put up an air of importance around him.

"All of us are clones."

—

"Huh? What's a 'clone'?" Kino asked.

"Speaking from definition, clones are 'life forms with the exact same structural information'."

"'Structural information'?"

"Yes. In each and every living thing, there is 'structural information', that is to say, a 'blueprint' of sorts. This blueprint is very, very small, but in accordance with the

different kinds of blueprints, many species of living things could be made. But even within an individual species, the form and shape are subtly different. In the case of humans, facial structure, skin color, hair color, eye color – these can all be different. The differences in the 'information' bring about the differences in each life form, and in the case of humans, in each individual. —— Do you understand up to this point?"

"Y-yes…" Kino said with a meek expression.

"Well, living things with no difference in their ' structural information' are called clones. For example, if you break off a branch of a tree and plant it in the ground , a tree will grow in that spot, right? Having done this, you just made one more tree with exactly the same ' structural information' using the first tree. This is also a clone. Do you follow so far?"

Kino nodded, "I understand. That's called grafting, right?"

"That's right. A clone, by nature, is a 'small branch'."

The guide continued. "And that is exactly what we are doing, but with humans. The men, the women, each and every one of them came from the foundational model of

a single person. They are all clones. In layman's terms, you could call them 'copy humans'. I think that at this point, you understand why we all have the same face."

"Yeah, I totally understand. Rather, you make it seem so logical; any other way would seem strange," Hermes said.

Kino glanced at Hermes, and then asked the guide, " But… all of this… how?"

"You are asking how it is that we produce these clones ?"

"Yes."

"Originally, a boy or girl would develop to a certain degree individually, and as a result, a baby would be born from a woman's womb. But with this method, the child's 'structural information' would be a mixture of two others; so a boy would not be exactly like the father, and a girl would not be exactly like the mother. That is why we use a different method."

Kino asked, "That is to say… a 'stamen' and a 'pistil' and those sorts of things aren't needed at all for this method of yours?"

The guide gave a faint smile. "That is correct. Incidentally, there is no 'stork' involved either."

Kino opened her eyes and lightly bit her lower lip, and leaned forward slightly.

"Um… that specific method, can you explain it to me in a way that I can understand, please?"

The guide answered, "Of course. That is the reason I invited you here. This facility was made for the purpose of carrying out that method. However, before I take you inside, let me give you a simple background of this country's history."

"Long ago, a man and woman stumbled upon this land where no one lived, and not even grass grew. Those two people were the 'originals' of every citizen of this country.

"The two had been born and raised in another country far, far away. There, they had studied biology and medicine. However, the research they proposed, that is to say, the cloning of humans, was rejected by others. Finally, they received orders to halt their research.

“The two decided to leave the country. They loaded all of the equipment they had developed in an enormous truck, and left on a journey to seek a new world where no one would get in their way.

“Then, the two found and dug up an underground water source. With their water troubles dispelled, they planted vegetables and began to raise grain and livestock .

“At the same time, in order to test the fruits of their research, they created clones of themselves. The babies who were safely born in this land were raised by the two as their own children.

“Finally, with an increase in crop production and a stable population, that is to say, more mouths to feed, this country was officially born. For hundreds of years since then, we have continued our sound way of living.”

—

“With that, let us go.”

Kino and Hermes continued through a passageway, led by the guide.

They passed by several people in lab coats who all, of course, had the same face. They went through several rigorous checkpoints, and finally arrived in front of a single door.

The guide announced their arrival and exclaimed jokingly, “Welcome to the ‘cabbage patch’!”

He opened the door.

There was a long passageway behind it. On one side of the passageway, the wall was made entirely of glass.

While pushing along Hermes, Kino slowly stepped inside.

On the other side of the glass was an area that was somewhat wider than the passageway. On the other side, several black glass tubes that looked like thick pillars were lined up evenly.

“Those glass tubes are our ‘wombs’. Look at number fourteen, if you will.”

The guide said, and pushed the switch he was holding.

The blackness in the tube began to fade. There was something in the center of the liquid-filled glass tube.

Soon its form was revealed. It was small, with arms and legs pointing downwards, and a large head. There was a tube extending upward attached to its belly button .

"A baby… before it's born…," Kino muttered.

"Amaaazing…," said Hermes happily.

"Correct. That is a fetus. It has been about thirty-five weeks since this child was conceived. It's flailing about, so I'm turning off the lights," the guide said.

The tube was once more immersed in color, and soon became as black as it had been before.

"All of the fetuses are raised like this. After one is fully grown, it is removed from this facility. In other words, it is 'born'. After that, things are just like in any other country. Now as to what you asked specifically earlier… "

Kino turned to the guide.

"There are several ways, but what we do now is like this. There are two things needed: First is the 'structural information' of a man if it is a man we want to make, and that of a woman, otherwise. As to which body it will be taken from, it doesn't matter. Once that information is taken, it will not result in the creation of anything but the part it is taken from, so if it is taken from a hand, then a hand is what we will get. The same goes for a foot; structural information from there will form a foot. This is a rather shoddy way of doing things, but if we gather information from all parts of the body, we will eventually be able to produce an entire body. The second thing needed is an unfertilized egg cell. We will collect this from a woman, and put it in cold storage. Do you understand me up to this point?"

"Somehow…, I think I get it."

"Yeah, I get it."

After confirming Kino and Hermes' understanding, the guide continued his explanation.

"Next, using a terribly precise operation, we will move the 'structural information' into the egg exactly as it is.

Doing so, the egg cell will now be carrying this ' structural information' and will become a fertilized egg. Then, this fertilized egg will be grown in a 'womb' for 265 days. ——Are you starting to understand what is going on?"

"I see… I think I'm starting to see the general picture."

"Hey, it's just like I said, Kino. This place is a factory, right?" Hermes said to Kino.

'Hahaha!' the guide laughed. "It is indeed just as Mister Hermes says! Instead of domestic production as was done long ago, we do it in a factory with a perfect quality control system. Thanks to this, things like ' stillbirth', 'miscarriage', and 'infertility', are now dead words in our country. Almost no one is aware of them."

Kino asked the guide a question. "Doesn't anyone wish to have children the normal…, I mean, old way? I know I'm uninformed, but after you substitute the ' information', isn't it possible to naturally return the egg cell to a woman's body…?"

The guide looked a bit taken aback.

“Your question does not sound the least bit uninformed. What you just said now, Miss Kino, is unmistakably possible. Actually, we use this method to increase the number of our livestock. After all, that method does not take too much time and effort. However … there is practically no one among us who will do it that way. There is no record of anyone ever having done so. There is also the matter of the nine months’ gestation period, and no one could even imagine going through so much trouble. They will be unable to do work. Other than that, there is the possibility of the pregnancy complications I mentioned earlier. To put it in other words, who would want to chop wood, now that we boil our water electronically and automatically?”

“I see…”

“Pretty convincing.”

Kino and Hermes said.

Becoming slightly garrulous, the guide continued. “Ah , but you see, the notion of ‘stamen and pistil, and so on’ has survived splendidly. In this country it is a method of

relaxation, basically an ‘activity done by two people’; a sport. It is something not far removed from tennis. Miss Kino, would you like to try it during your stay?”

“…… Ah, no, I’ll have to decline,” said Kino.

—

On the path, a group of married couples entered. Of course, the men had the same face as the guide, and the women had the same face as one another. The women were slightly plump.

Seeing the guide, one of the women let out a surprised voice.

“Oh? It’s rare that we meet here. Are you on break from your town hall duties? You couldn’t possibly be skipping out on your work or anything, could you?”

"That's mean. I am working, you know. I am doing guide work; it has been a while since I last had to show a visitor around. Everyone, this is Miss Kino and Mister Hermes."

Kino bowed, and Hermes said 'hello'.

"Oh, you're the travelers who arrived yesterday. Welcome!" the woman said cheerfully, and beckoned Kino and the others over with her hand.

"Look, my daughter's here. I want everyone to meet her. Come, come. She's number twenty-five!"

Everyone walked ahead, and looked inside tube twenty-five.

Inside the tube, there was nothing.

The woman pulled out a pair of binoculars, and looked inside of the glass tube. She grinned, and then handed the binoculars to Kino.

Kino peered through them. In the center, a tiny, tiny something was barely visible.

“Can you see her? You can see her, right?”

“Y-yeah…,” was all Kino managed to say.

“Isn’t she cute? She’s so adorable, isn’t she?” The woman began to shower Kino with questions.

“…… Yeah…”

She was ecstatic. “Even though it’s only been six weeks, she’s already starting to look as cute as me!”

“……”

The guide helped Kino, who had no idea what to say, out of the situation.

“W-well, how about I show you around the educational facility?”

—

The guide led Kino and Hermes out of the ‘cabbage patch’ and took them down an ordinary-looking hallway.

“What exactly is the educational facility?” Kino asked.

“It is just as the name would indicate. It is a place where eligible individuals are taught various things. First , I will explain who these eligible individuals are.”

The guide explained as he walked. “In this country, people over sixteen years of age who desire to have children must undergo an examination. Married or not, the questions are based around confirming the ability of the individuals to raise a child properly. There are several primary factors for this. The person’s bodily and mental state, their economic status, their job or educational status, their experience with raising children, whether or not they have people in their neighborhood that can help them, for instance family, are all tested. Their documents are inspected, they go through an interview, notes are taken on them, then they practice, among other things, and finally, an examination in an isolated facility lasting ten days is performed. In order to see if the person has tendencies toward violence, they are

put in a simulated state where they are unable to do as they please, and then pushed to the limit psychologically. We judge their ability to cope, and unless they score ninety-eight points or more on this test, they will not be qualified to receive a child."

"Pretty strict, isn't it?" said Hermes.

"Yes, it is indeed very strict. No matter how many times I see it happen, I still think it is strict, but…"

"But?" Kino asked.

The guide looked forward, his expression resolute.

"If people who desire a child are not able to pass such strict tests, then they could not possibly be ready for something like parenthood. If someone is not willing to bestow kind, calm, and unconditional affection upon their child, then they are not fit to be parents. Having a child is not like buying a pet turtle or iguana. You are bringing a single human into the world, and you have almost complete control over their life…. As a human, is there a greater responsibility than that? No, absolutely not!" the guide recited passionately, his hands curling into fists.

“People who think of raising children as a game, people who have children so that they can show them off to others, people who make their children into personal slaves and force them to do the impossible, people who selfishly turn their children into their heirs, locking them up and taking away their freedom to do what they want in life, people who use their children for ‘recreation’ when they are stressed or dead drunk ——these sort of parents are yet to be ‘born’, and if you look at our history , not one child has been raised in an unhealthy way, not even excluding certain isolation orders received from town hall. In order to prevent this country from sinking into ruin, having people who want to become parents take this difficult test is a top priority. This institution does not only produce children, but also parents.”

“I see…. In one country I visited, there was a saying: ‘I’d like to see how his parents are like.’[3]” Kino said.

“‘I’d like to see how his parents are like,’ eh? Those are fine words indeed…. I’ll remember them. Incidentally, in this country, if a parent murders their child, they are given a death sentence without question. If a child murders a parent, however, it is not considered a crime no matter what the age of the child or their reason for doing it. It is only natural, because after all, children

were raised by their parents. If the child you raised would strike, kick, or even kill you, then you have no right to complain. It is entirely the fault of the parents who raised the child. You just have to accept it."

"……"

"……"

Then, the guide stopped at the end of the hallway which was lined up with several chairs.

"I'm sorry, we passed over the door," the guide said.

—

"… And then, the people who have passed the examination, that is to say, the eligible individuals, will be waiting as 'parents-in-training'. This will continue for the same amount of time as the case I first mentioned earlier — 265 days, in other words, the same amount of time it takes for a fetus to fully grow."

Passing through a door, Kino, Hermes, and the guide went along a different path. Half of the surface of the floor was made of glass, and underneath, there was an area that looked similar to a classroom.

“Please, take a look.”

In the room that the guide pointed out, there were ten or so people practicing infant bathing with dolls. In a neighboring classroom, a study session with people using notes and textbooks was being held. Next to that room, a class on making baby food was being conducted. The male to female ratio was exactly one to one. Everyone was frantic.

“Yes, as you can see, everyone masters the techniques required for raising a child. There is also a final examination, and until you pass, you cannot embrace your child. Because everyone is so determined, none of them fail the exam.”

“I see,” Kino muttered as she looked below.

“And finally, the day they have been waiting for, the ‘ birth’, finally arrives. It is the first time they can hold their child with their own hands. … It is truly a moving experience, to take a small life made entirely from your

own ‘information’ into your hands. Even though everyone knows that in this country, the men are all the same as the men, and the women are all the same as the women, their own child is still more special than the rest. And in the case of married people like me, the wife I love and my daughters, who are just like her, are much more special to me than anybody else.”

The guide narrowed his eyes and continued. “ Unfortunately, there are no births scheduled for either today or tomorrow. I cannot show you the profound emotion during the moment of birth. That is my one regret.”

—

After they finished their tour of the classrooms, Kino, Hermes, and the guide returned to the reception room.

The guide gave Kino one final piece of information.

“Our country has one immense weak point,” he said with a grave face.

"Weak point?" Kino asked.

"Yes, and that is disease. The thorough blood inspection that you had to go through before entering the country could not be overlooked even the tiniest bit, because we have to be certain that you are not bringing any foreign diseases into the country. Even if it might be something commonly suffered by people born in your country of birth, it may be lethal to the 'two individuals', from which all of us clones came from. Do you understand what I mean?"

The guide gave a little quiz, and Kino replied slowly, confirming her understanding. "… You mean to say, because everyone here is exactly the same, if a disease affects one person, there is a danger that it will affect everyone else as well. With just a single disease, the entire population could be obliterated."

"It's similar to how motorrads made in the same place, on the same assembly line, in the same factory, will all break down the same way, right?" Hermes said. The guide nodded satisfactorily.

"That's exactly how it is."

"What are the actual conditions? Have there been such a crisis in the past?" Kino asked. The guide shook his head.

"Up until now, no such event has occurred. Because we carefully inspect everyone who steps in this land for possible illnesses, our children have remained. We do not intend to cut off this land from the outside. That is why we have created the checking process for the occasional traveler that comes our way. In addition, since we do it so thoroughly, there has not been any incident up to this point. The future is always uncertain, though."

"……"

"Oh come now, this world is never completely safe," the guide said in a bright voice to Kino, who had a serious expression on. "But…"

"But?" Kino asked.

"If you have the will to survive, it is not that easy to perish," the guide said to her with a grin.

—

“With that, the tour is complete. How was it?”

“It was very interesting. I’m beyond satisfied,” Hermes said.

“That makes me very happy. How about you, Miss Kino?”

“… Out of all of the countries I’ve visited until now, this one has surprised me the most… It was a great idea to come here,” Kino said, making several small nods.

“Thank you very much. When you say that, it makes me glad to be a tour guide,” the guide said happily, looking relieved.

He then asked, “Miss Kino, I will be returning home for a while to have my lunch. Would you like to come with me? If you desire to try the homemade cooking of this country, it would be far more delicious than any restaurant you will find here. I suppose it would be a misuse of my authority to mix public and private life, but how about it?”

—

Kino came down from the car while pushing along Hermes. At the same time, four girls, all with the same faces and wearing the same clothes, and three boys, all with the same faces and wearing the same clothes, surrounded her.

The children were lined up in front of their home, waiting for the return of the guide.

The children looked at Kino and Hermes, and all began speaking at once to the point that Kino couldn’t understand what any of them were saying.

“Why, thank you for the reception everyone. This here is Miss Kino, a traveler. This is her partner, the motorrad Mister Hermes,” the guide said.

“Hello everyone.”

“Hello!”

And then, they were pulled along by the children who had begun to speak without regard to each other again, into the property. The guide’s wife, who had the same face as all the other women, came out to meet them in her apron.

Kino was guided through their spacious garden. Over there was a pretty lawn and plants that looked like a lot of care had gone into them, as well as a large table. On the table, dishes were arranged.

The guide told his children to line up in the order of their birth, as he was going to introduce them. The children all lined up in a row.

“Now then, starting from the right: My eldest daughter, Hen, twelve years old; my second eldest daughter, Duo, eleven years old; my eldest son Tria, ten years old.”

As the children were called, the girls grabbed the hems of their skirts and curtsied, while the boys placed their hand over their chests and bowed.

“I have two third eldest daughters, Tetra and Freja. They are both nine years old. They were born on the exact same day.”

The two, who looked every inch exactly the same as each other, bowed at exactly the same time.

“My second eldest son, Hex, eight years old; and my youngest son, Hepta, seven years old.[4] They are all my precious family…. Oh yes, and then my wife.”

“Oh, I am honored that you remember me,” his wife joked.

All of the food served at lunch could more or less be called delicious. The guide told Kino that the animals and vegetables were produced through cloning techniques, so the country never had to be worried about food.

After they had finished dessert, the children all played in the garden. The wife asked the guide if it was all right for him to skip work from the town hall. While lying down on the grass,

“My work for today is to be with the traveler. It’s fine as long as the boss doesn’t find out.”

“Dear, that is misuse of your authority, mixing public and private life, you know,” the wife, who spoke in an exasperated tone, and Kino, met eyes and smiled wryly.

Hermes, surrounded by the kids, made a splendid plaything for them.

After looking at the children for a while, Kino spoke to the guide, who was lying on his side.

“Sorry if I get it wrong. The one farthest to the left is Hen. Next is Tria, then Hepta, then Hex. The one touching Hermes’ light is Tetra, and the one behind her is Freja. The one sitting in the chair drinking tea by herself is Duo.”

“……”

The guide jumped to his feet, tossing a glance at the children.

“… That’s correct. But how in the world…?” He looked at Kino with a surprised expression.

"At first I couldn't tell them apart, so I watched them while they ate. I was a bit surprised. The way they eat and the littlest of their gestures are all different. Later, I realized their personalities reflect the subtle differences in their outward appearance," Kino said. The guide remained speechless for a while.

"…… You are correct, but to find out so much in such a short time… why, Miss Kino, you have excellent observational skills. Well done!"

Kino looked somewhat embarrassed.

"Incidentally, which ones were the hardest to discern? " the guide asked.

"The eldest boy, Tria, and the youngest boy, Hepta. They are about the same height, and their expressions and actions resemble one another. They're both very obedient, aren't they?"

"You are quite sharp. Both of them can't stand against their older sisters. Well, I myself am no match for my wife, so it's not that surprising. Amongst my boys, only Hex was born with some guts… Who could you tell apart immediately?"

Kino looked at the two girls standing in front of Hermes.

"Tetra and Freja, despite looking exactly the same, were unexpectedly easy to tell apart. Freja is always standing behind Tetra."

The guide told Kino she was absolutely right, and then his expression darkened a little.

"Freja, you see, was actually not supposed to become our daughter…"

Kino turned her face to the guide.

"In this country, you cannot request two children at once. At the most, you can only have one child per year. As for Freja… the young woman who was supposed to become her mother is said to have died in an accident only two days before she was born. On the same day our Tetra was 'born', we received her by a special exception. ' Freja' was the name of that woman."

"Is that so…"

"Of course, since she has the same 'information' as my wife and daughters, there have been no problems.

Everyone in the family knows about Freja's circumstances. Just…"

"Just?"

"That young woman Freja—— what happened to her is certainly regrettable. Every time that name crosses my lips, I can't help but remember what happened to her. Because of that, I feel I have to make Freja happy for her sake, and I am always thinking of what I could do in order to achieve that."

"……"

The guide looked at the two children for a while. As he did, Freja came over to him and invited him, telling him that since it has been a long time, she wanted to play with him for the rest of the day. The guide looked at his daughter with a slightly troubled face.

Kino suddenly stood up.

"Well then, it's about time for us to go around the country by ourselves. That tour for today was more than enough. It helped me out a lot. Thank you very much. … If I meet your boss, I'll tell him that you guided me the whole day."

The guide looked up at Kino in surprise.

"It's okay as long as he doesn't find out, right?" Kino said with a smile.

—

The next day. That is, the morning of the third day since Kino had entered the country.

The weather was good as usual. When Kino asked, she was told that it's like this the whole year round.

Kino replenished Hermes' fuel, and after securing some food and water for herself, finished her departure preparations before noon.

In front of the hotel, the guide came with the rest of his family, and received each one's parting words. She thanked the guide especially for what he had done the previous day.

The guide had his wife drive the children home. Then he turned to Kino and Hermes. "There is one last important thing that I have to tell you. Please listen well, " the guide said with a serious expression more stern than anything he had put on up to this point.

—

From inside the gate, the guide, the hotel owners, and everyone else around who seemed to have free time gathered to send off the traveler. All the men had the same faces, and all the women had the same faces.

The guide spoke as everyone's representative, "Miss Kino, Mister Hermes, thank you so much for spending time in our country. If you ever happen to pass nearby, please visit without any hesitation. At that time, it's probably my children who will be welcoming you."

"Thank you very much."

"Thanks, stay well everyone."

Watching Kino’s back as she passed through the gate, the guide took a deep breath.

“With this, I’m also done with my guide work…. I wonder if even fewer travelers will come.”

The hotel owner, upon hearing this, said to the guide in a somewhat surprised tone, “Don’t say things like that, and quickly head back to the town hall. Don’t you have a lot of work to do?”

“That is right. Things will be tough from here on. You took half the day off yesterday, correct? You shouldn’t be loafing around all the time! Now, back to work, back to work!” the owner’s wife chimed in.

The former guide who was unforgivingly scolded by his senior muttered weakly,

“Fine…”

"Yep, that was interesting. Truly interesting."

"Uh-huh."

Kino and Hermes chatted with one another while running through the wilderness path, the gate behind them.

"We should go back to that country again sometime."

"Oh? It's really rare for you to say something like that, Kino."

The motorrad puffed up a cloud of dust without reserve.

Someone was peering at Kino and Hermes from a nearby place through a pair of binoculars. They dug a hole in the ground and covered it with a cloth of the same color.

"Okay! They're confirmed to be safe!" he said happily.

"They're pretty lucky, eh? Do you think they learned of the horrors of that country?" someone else beside him asked.

"That's not important. Our job is to make sure there are no more victims," the first person said in a slightly lively voice, and continued,

"Sergeant, contact headquarters. Tell them that we will be taking the traveler into custody."

The motorrad ran along through the valley with the country, and climbed the hill that appeared before them.

When they reached the flat summit, they saw three humans. Kino suddenly hit the brakes and stopped.

The three men wore clothes the same color as the ground, and their faces were painted. Their clothes were

so similar to the color of the ground that if they had been lying on the road, Kino would have mistakenly run over them.

The faces of all three were different. One of them extended an empty hand, and slowly approached Kino. Then he spoke, “Traveler, I am sorry to trouble you, but might you be able to come this way for a bit?”

“How come?” Kino asked. The man took another step closer, and saluted.

“I am a soldier from a country far to the south from here. From here on, my country will be performing a military operation. It is very dangerous to be here right now. Until things clear up, we would like you to wait for a while in a safe place.”

“If I refuse, you intend to take me by force, am I right? ”

The soldier nodded to Kino’s question. “That is correct . We have been ordered to protect you, miss traveler, by all means.”

“I understand. Since I also intend to protect myself, I’ll do as you say.”

As Kino said this, one of the soldiers crouched on the ground, and lifted up a cloth. There was a hole, in which was hidden a small buggy.

—

On the slope of a hill opposite the country, from a place where the country was fairly visible, there was a big tent. A number of binoculars were installed; soldiers were peeking at the country in the valley through them.

Kino and Hermes were politely led to this place.

"We have company!"

"Good job."

After the soldier saluted and left, a middle-aged man wearing a military uniform introduced himself to Kino.

"Hello, miss traveler and mister motorrad. I am the commander of all of the troops here. If our troops'

actions harmed an innocent traveler in any way, I apologize on my country’s behalf. This place is our frontline headquarters. As long as you are here, you will be safe. I’m terribly sorry, but you have to wait here for a while.”

“I see. By the way, what are you going to do from here on?”

At the same time as Kino asked this question, someone issued an order to depart from the wireless radio under the tent.

“I assure your safety, miss traveler. Prepare for the bombardment!”

“Bombardment?” Hermes asked, and the Commander answered.

“Yes. Starting now, our army will bombard that country in the opposite side of the valley. Please observe.”

He pointed at the slanting bottom of the hill, where a number of embankments were lined up. The soldiers took off all the covers, and a large number of artillery cannons were revealed.

The muzzles of the cannon slowly lifted up, and all of them pointed right towards the direction of the country.

The order was given in a hurry from the headquarters.

“All cannons, ready!” “Observation team, ready!” “ Medic team, ready!”

“Once the bombarding begins, we can go out the hill and enjoy a good view. Well then, let’s go…,” the Commander said to Kino, and then he gave out the orders to his men.

“Commence attack!”

From the bottom of the valley resounded roars akin to lightning hitting a house next door. All of the cannons produced white smoke. The soldiers in the headquarters tent climbed up the hill. Kino also rode Hermes and climbed up.

From afar, a black flower bloomed at once above the skies of the country. The succeeding explosions produced smoke that looked like flowers. The sound of those explosions reached them after some delay.

The cannons from the back roared once more, and several flowers bloomed again. This was repeated several times.

All the while, the Commander who was watching beside Kino explained politely, "That shell fired just now would explode in the air, scattering minute fragments into the surrounding area. Then, all of the people outdoors and those inside not so sturdy structures will be successfully annihilated."

"……"

Eventually the black bloom vanished, and from inside the wall, something exploded in a flash.

"That was a high-power explosive. It will destroy anyone inside solid structures. This is to make sure that everything's done thoroughly."

In the surrounding area, the sound of firing cannons, and the delayed impact of the projectiles mixed together, creating extremely noisy sounds.

Kino spoke to the Commander in a loud voice, "Even if I tell you to stop this bombardment, you won't. Am I right?"

"That's unreasonable. If we stop now, there's the danger of a counter-attack."

The Commander stopped at this point for a moment, as if he realized something. "Oh, I see. You must have forgotten something there, miss traveler. We will compensate you for it. We are truly sorry that an innocent person had to be involved in this matter."

Kino shook her head. "No, thank you. It wasn't something of extremely significant value."

The Commander looked at Kino's worried face.

"Two days before, we saw you enter that country. The truth is, the bombing was scheduled for yesterday noon, but we don't want to involve innocents, so we waited," the Commander said.

"I see…. Thanks, I'm truly grateful to you. By the way, can I at least hear the reason for the bombardment?"

"Why of course. That is a country where everyone had the same faces. We would like to erase that devil's country from the face of this earth"

"Which means——" Kino tried to speak, but the violent volleys of cannon erased her voice. She spoke once more.

"Which means, one of you have entered that country?"

"Yes…. By chance, a group of travelers from our country went astray. And then, they saw that. People with the same faces, beings created from glass containers. They frantically escaped and returned home, and told us about this. But…"

"But?"

"Among those ten people, one committed suicide…. The rest received extreme mental shock. At least two were broken down in mind and body, and were admitted to hospital for medical treatment. It was really pitiful…"

"That's why you have to make sure…"

"… To completely destroy it," Hermes interrupted and spoke amidst the sound of firing cannons. From the country, something burning began to emit black smoke. The explosions continued.

"Yes, that's right. So that the number of victims will not increase any further, and so that the devilish acts of that country not spread to ours or to other countries…. But miss traveler, for letting you enter and witness that, we were truly worried that you will come out as another victim. We're really glad to see that you're fine…"

"……"

"……"

Suddenly, the cannon roars died down. The last shell exploded, and the sound echoed lowly. And then it became quiet. Black smoke arose amidst the fragments in the interior of the walls, and was slowly carried away by the wind.

"Is it over?" Kino asked, and the Commander answered that the bombardment is over.

"The 'bombardment'? Is there anything else?"

"Yes. Please look over there."

The Commander pointed behind the row of cannons. There was an enormous shaft, like a factory chimney, on a push cart that was being pulled by a truck. It has a

pointed tip, and a small wing-like protrusion was attached on its rear.

"A missile?" Hermes asked, and the Commander nodded.

"Now, we will fire that to the country. If even one person was left, they might increase in number again. To ensure that they are completely annihilated, we took the pains to develop a special bomb."

"A special bomb?"

To Kino's question, the Commander only suggested that she look and enjoy the view. He added, "Miss traveler. It would be a good idea to wear your goggles and bandana."

The missile head slowly rose up. And then, the Commander brought down the order to fire.

From the jet propulsion at the rear, flames and smoke erupted, and a thunderous roar was heard at the same time as the shaft rose into the air.

The smoke left trails, and the missile flied out. And then it split into two in the air. Its rear fell feebly. The

pointed end drew a parabola and dropped to the country in a gentle slope.

Just before it dropped, the tip split, and white smoke spread in an instant. The whole country was wrapped in a semi-spherical smoke as if a net was cast over it. In the next moment, the hemisphere transformed into huge balls of fire. The masses of flame covered everything, and were exhausted.

For several seconds, the thunderous roar and the shockwave reached the place where Kino and the others were. Dust soared violently, and for a while, nothing could be seen.

Plenty of time passed before the dust cloud was cleared away. Nothing was left of the place where the country had been, except for the scattered fragments of the wall which was blown to bits. Everything was flat. Up in the sky, a mushroom cloud, like one formed after a volcanic eruption, was leisurely ascending.

“We did it—!”

In the headquarters, the soldiers raised a cheer. They leaped happily and embraced each other.

"Wha—, amazing. That was the special bomb?" Hermes asked.

"Yes, that's right. Everything worked out well." The Commander showed a face of relief.

Kino pulled down her bandana and asked, 'How does it work?'

"Did you see that white fluid which spread? That was fuel. It covered the entire country, and a little bit later, a bomb will set it aflame. And then, the surrounding oxygen will all be taken up and burned. The pressure will squish flat everything above ground. Furthermore, the heat will grill any living thing's lungs. Not a single insect or animal will be left in there. It was a huge success," the Commander said, and smiled as if he felt really good. He took off his dust-covered hat and brushed it off lightly.

"This is the end of this lengthy mission."

He said calmly, and then took a photo from his breast. He looked at it, and his eyes narrowed.

"What is that?" Kino asked.

"My daughters."

The Commander handed the photo to Kino with a smile.

It was the picture of two ten-year old girls, smiling, with exactly the same face.

"……"

Still silent, Kino showed the photo to Hermes, and then asked its owner a question.

"They're twins?"

"Yes. Ireen and her younger sister, Meel."

Kino spoke with a slightly worried tone, "I… can't tell who's who."

The Commander was amused. "Hahaha. If you meet them, you'd be able to tell them apart immediately. The older sister is very spirited, while the younger one is really shy and withdrawn."

"I see…," Kino muttered, and returned the photo. The Commander looked at it slowly once more.

"Since this mission began, I haven't seen them for more than six months. Now that the forces can safely pull out from this country, I'll be able to see the two of them soon. Both of them must have grown very much…"

Kino spoke gently. "Once you go back to your country, the day you can hold them in your arms will be near. I'm sure you're looking forward to it."

"Thanks…. Miss traveler, you're now safe. It took quite some time, but we truly are grateful for your cooperation. If you happen to come to the south, please drop by our country. At that time, my daughters will be welcoming you."

Kino grinned, "Sounds great. Well then, we'll be going ."

—

Kino and Hermes came out of the headquarters, and ran above the hill for a while.

As she stopped by the remains of the country, she spoke, “Everyone, please take care. Thank you for everything.”

“Yup. See ya!”

The motorrad climbed down the hill.

They passed by the smiling and waving soldiers beside the cannons, and eventually set off.

—

After several days, the cannons, which were no longer useful to the army, were scattered and buried underground. After confirming that they haven’t left any trash behind, the soldiers returned home with their trucks.

On the earth where the country formerly stood, only rubble and burnt remains were left.

—

Then, after fifty days have passed, the wind carried earth slowly to the ruins, and the color of the ground changed.

And then, one morning after fifty more days have passed.

From the earth of the ruins, rubble and dust was blown away, and the ground split open.

It was a rectangular concrete structure, as big as a house. There was a door, and it was open.

From inside, men with the same faces, and women with the same faces, came out in groups. They looked up in the sky; everyone had smiles on their faces.

The man who served as Kino’s guide came out together with his wife and children.

“Be careful of the rubble. Don’t fall over them.”

The man said to the children who were in high spirits.

"Wow, the sun after so long!"

"Look, everything's destroyed——"

"Amazing. Everything's flat and brand new."

Freja, who was gripping his father's hands, "Let's play on the lawn again like before, okay?" She looked up at her father and asked.

"Of course. The forest will return to its original form, too. In the blink of an eye, at that."

Freja grinned, and ran to her siblings who were walking ahead.

Someone with the same face came to the man's side.

"Oh dear. They did a pretty good job wiping everything off clean. From here on, the town hall will be busy." The man smiled bitterly.

"Yeah…. We will have less time for rest again."

‘Hahahaha!’ the man beside him laughed heartily, and then spoke, “My condolences, your excellency. Perhaps this amount of work is too much for just one citizen. Maybe I should watch over you more.”

The guide, who apparently was the leader, shrugged his shoulders.

“Oh dear. I wouldn’t find a boss as strict as you anywhere else.”

“Hahahahahaha!” The other man left, laughing.

—

In the ruins, people flowed out of the exit. All men had the same face as one another. All women had the same as one another.

The guide-turned-leader looked around him, and said with a smile,

“If you have the will to survive, it is not that easy to perish.”

“A Tale of a Mechanical Doll” —One-way Mission—[5]

Chapter Four

"A Tale of a Mechanical Doll"

— One-way Mission —

"Oh my, how surprising… to meet someone in a place like this."

So said a lone old woman who revealed herself from behind a thicket inside a deciduous forest. The old woman's thin body was wrapped with an apron. She was carrying a basket with heaps of edible wild plants and mushrooms inside.

She was speaking to a young person. It was someone around mid-teens, with short, black hair, big eyes, and an intrepid expression on her face. She wore a black jacket fastened with a wide belt on her waist. Suspended from her right thigh was a holster for a hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case a pistol). Inside it was a high-caliber revolver. Attached behind her waist was another automatic-type.

Parked right beside this person was a motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly).

"Hello," the person greeted.

"Hi there. You're a traveler, aren't you?" The old woman returned the greeting with a smile.

"Yes. I'm Kino, and this here is my partner, Hermes."

The traveler whose name was Kino introduced the motorrad. The motorrad called Hermes returned a short ' hello', and proceeded to ask a question.

"Do you live near here, grandma?"

"Yes, that's right. What about you two?"

Kino hesitated for a bit, and then asked the old woman ,

"Is there a country around this area? We were aiming for that place, but we couldn't find it. Are you a resident of that country, by any chance?"

The old woman shook her head. "A country, you say …? No, there's none nearby. I'm sure you've lost your way somewhere. As for me, I live in a house inside this forest."

"I see. There was a road up until here, though…," Kino sighed.

"Yeah, but it seemed like an abandoned route. Why don't we just give up?" Hermes suggested.

The old woman realized their circumstances, and asked Kino and Hermes with a lively voice, "Say, Miss Kino. Are you going to camp out here for today? It will be dark soon. If you like, I can let you stay in the house where I work for."

"Work for?"

The old woman replied to Kino's question. "Yes. I work as a maid in the house where I live in. I was gathering ingredients for dinner just now. The house is right there. What do you think?"

Kino asked Hermes' opinion. As always, he just answered with 'why not?'

"Okay. We'll take you up on your offer," Kino said.

"Oh, I'm glad. It's the first time that we'll be having guests," she said happily.

—

They went inside the forest under the guidance of the old woman. After a while, a field in a forest clearing appeared. Beside it was a long and narrow livestock pen with chickens freely roaming about.

Beyond the fields, there was a single house.

Kino couldn't help but knit her eyebrows upon seeing the house. It was a three-storey building sturdily made out of stone and bricks. It was much longer than it was wide, and doesn't have a single window at the sides. It looked more like a downtown apartment, except that it stood alone in the middle of the forest. This house certainly didn't belong to its surroundings.

"That's the place?" Kino asked with a hint of doubt in her tone.

"Yes. Isn't it wonderful?" the old woman answered.

Soon they made their way in front of the entrance, and the old woman turned to Kino and Hermes.

"Oh, right. First, I'll have to inform you about something in advance."

The old woman slowly placed her right hand on her chest, and spoke with a gentle smile, "I am a mechanical doll."

"A mechanical doll?" Kino asked in surprise.

"That's right. Even though I look exactly like a human, I am actually very different from you. This body was entirely made from wood, iron, and other things I don't really know about. I am a mechanical doll created by humans for the sake of humans. My work is to do household chores for the humans residing in this house."

"……. U-umm…" Kino faltered, while the old woman continued.

"Because this body is already old, I am already getting rickety in places, but I can still work."

Hermes asked, "Ooh, you sure are well-made. Who created you, grandma?"

The old woman shook her head. "I was not given that kind of information. All I know is how to clean the house , do the laundry, cook meals, read stories to my young master before he goes to bed…"

"……"

"I see."

Kino remained silent while Hermes voiced his admiration.

"Well, I'll have to ask my master about you. I'm sure he would be fine with it, but for the meantime, please wait here."

Kino spoke up at last when the woman vanished into the house.

"Impossible."

"You bet. What are we going to do?"

"Well, it seems like we have no choice but to ask this ' master'," Kino muttered as the entrance opened.

Out came a man in his thirties, a woman of the same age who seemed to be his wife, and a five-year old boy shyly hiding behind the woman. They were all wearing elegant clothes.

After a while, the old woman made an introduction.

"Master, this is the traveler, Miss Kino and the motorrad, Mister Hermes. Miss Kino, these are my master, his wife, and their son."

"Good afternoon," Kino greeted. The 'master' slowly smiled and spoke.

"Good day, traveler and motorrad. We heard about your circumstances from granny. It seems like you've lost your way. We have plenty of vacant rooms, so please feel at home."

The old woman seemed very happy. "Oh, I'm glad. That's great, isn't it? Now that it's decided, I'll be preparing the room for Miss Kino, so for the meantime, won't you keep them company for a while, Master?"

"Yes, of course. Leave it to us. Please prepare dinner for one more person," the man said.

"Now, please come in."

Kino and Hermes were guided by the old woman and passed through a spacious living room.

The man read a newspaper while sitting on the sofa, while his wife and child played with an unfamiliar toy. They carried on happily with these activities.

The old woman bowed and left.

“Um, will you answer a question for me?” Kino asked, and the man looked at her.

“Of course. What is it?”

“It’s about that old lady…,” Kino spoke hesitantly, “Is what she’s saying the truth? That she’s a mechanical doll ?”

The man nodded lightly. “Yes, that’s correct. That doll’ s a hard worker and is a great help in the house. Thanks to that, my wife and I could work, and have more time for our family.”

“I see…. I have one more question.”

“What is it?”

“Is there a country around here?”

The man's face became slightly troubled upon hearing this question. "No, there's no country nearby. Miss traveler, it seems like you've lost your way…. This is a heavily wooded area, so that is not possible," the man answered.

Kino asked in return, "Then, why are you living in this kind of place?"

"……"

The man did not say anything for a while. And then he spoke with a smile, "No, there's no country nearby. Miss traveler, it seems like you've lost your way…. This is a heavily wooded area, so that is not possible."

"Is that so…"

After this, Kino said nothing more and waited quietly beside Hermes.

Eventually, they heard the return of the lively footsteps. The old woman announced with a smile, " Your room is ready. Please come this way."

"Thank you very much… if you'll excuse us."

“Have a good time.”

Kino bowed lightly and pushed Hermes out of the reception room.

The man read the newspaper until the end.

Then started to read it from the beginning once more.

—

The room they were taken to was in the inner part of the first floor. It was rather spacious, with a painstakingly-made bed and other furniture which seemed to have history. Everything was wiped with a damp cloth so there was not a single speck of dust.

“You can stay here together with Mister Hermes. There’s a toilet and a shower inside. If you need anything , just ring the bell anytime. My room is right beside the entrance.”

Kino expressed her thanks. The old woman then left the room to prepare dinner.

Kino sat on the bed and removed her holstered persuader. Then she took off her jacket.

"Kino, what are we going to do?" Hermes asked.

"What to do…. To be frank, that family doesn't seem like they want to associate with us."

"That's only natural."

"Moreover, there are a lot of things they don't want to tell us."

"That's also understandable."

"Well, since grandma took pains to shelter us, let's just accept her kindness and stay until tomorrow."

"Understood."

—

After taking a shower, Kino was called for dinner.

The family was sitting in silence in front of a splendid table in the dining room.

The woman moved nimbly on her own, lining up all of the dishes on the table from a food cart. There was fresh vegetable salad, consommé with mushrooms, a portion of steaming chicken served with finely chopped vegetables in olive oil sauce, and well-baked bread fresh from the oven with butter in a bowl.

“I hope you enjoy this old junk’s cooking. It’s a great honor for me,” the old woman bowed and went out of the room.

The man spoke to Kino, “Traveler, please help yourself .”

The family didn’t start eating the food, and just sat expressionlessly.

While observing the family, Kino slowly began to eat. After taking a bite, Kino’s meek expression became firm. Her pace quickened, and her face was full of satisfaction as she tasted all of the dishes.

When Kino has finished eating, the family silently stood up and moved to one side of the room carrying their plates. They moved aside a picture decorating the wall, revealing a small door. They opened it and threw away all of the food that they didn’t even touch inside the hole.

“……”

Kino was looking as they did this.

The old woman knocked and entered the dining room.

“How was it?”

“Yup. It was delicious. That chicken was the best.”

“It was great. Thank you, as always.”

“It was delicious——”

The family answered the old woman's question without hesitation.

The old woman bowed with a smile, then turned to Kino. "Miss Kino, how was the food?"

"Eh? Yes, it was very delicious. I enjoyed it very much, " Kino said honestly.

"Oh, I'm glad," the old woman said happily while laying down the plates with the desserts. And then she left.

Kino ate the dessert —raspberry sherbet— with delight.

The family remained silent and waited for Kino to finish eating, then tossed away the melted sherbet into the hole in the wall.

The man rang the bell and the old woman came.

"We'll be excusing ourselves. Miss Kino, please have a relaxing stay," the family said to Kino before they went out. The old woman happily removed the tableware and wiped the table clean.

Kino asked if there's anything she could help with, but the old woman only shook her head and asked her instead, "Miss Kino, I'll take something for you to drink before you sleep. Do you like hot chocolate?"

"Y-yes… thank you very much," Kino said, and the old woman shook her head slowly once more.

"You don't have to thank me," and while narrowing her wrinkled eyes,

"It makes me feel great to be of use to somebody."

—

"——so that's how it is."

"I see. But, they didn't have to throw it away."

"Yeah. I almost begged them to give it to me instead."

"Where's the family now?"

"It's still seems a bit early in the evening. The old woman told me not to go to the second floor."

"What do you think?"

"Well, it's definitely not normal, but… without knowing the circumstances, I can't really say anything."

"Right. What about grandma?"

"She seemed busy so… I'll just try to ask tomorrow. It' s been a long time since I have last slept on a bed."

"Okay, good night——"

—

The next morning.

Kino woke up at dawn as usual. The weather was good. She moved her body lightly, then performed the maintenance of her persuaders.

When she went out to the corridor, she heard a sound from the kitchen. Kino peeked inside the slightly opened door and saw the old woman happily preparing breakfast. She rolled up fresh dough, and then molded it into shape. Then she coated it with melted butter and put it in the oven. She turned over a big hourglass.

Kino lightly knocked on the door.

“Good morning.”

“Oh my, Miss Kino. Good morning. It’s still too early. Did I wake you up, by any chance?”

“No, I always wake up this early. By the way, do you bake bread every morning?” Kino asked. The old woman answered as her hands continued to move.

“Yes. My most important job in the morning is to bake bread. Everyone eats lots of it, you see.”

The family woke up and sat at the dining table. The man and his wife were wearing business suits, while the son was carrying a small bag.

“Good morning. Miss Kino, were you able to rest well last night?” the man asked.

“Yes. It was all thanks to you,” Kino answered.

Baked bread, different kinds of jam, honey, soft-boiled eggs, salads, and crisply grilled bacon were lined up on the table.

“Traveler, please help yourself,” the man said. Without hesitation, Kino took as much as she could eat in her plate, and ate with much pleasure.

Just as the night before, the family only sat in silence. After some time, they threw away everything.

The man called for the old woman, who handed them two bags. And then, the three left the house.

The old woman returned to the dining room. When asked how the food was, Kino once again replied honestly.

“Without a doubt, this one is the best among the recent breakfasts that I had. It was much more delicious than any hotel’s or restaurant’s.”

“Why, thank you.”

“By the way, I have a question…,” Kino said, and the woman stopped and turned around.

“Yes?”

“Where is everybody going?”

—

“——My master and his wife goes to work. Their son goes to a nursery school. Every day, for five days a week.”

"Okay—. Grandma really said that?"

"Yeah. In any case, the couple works in different places, and since the husband is closer, he drops off and picks up the son from school. Well, it seems like they won't be home until evening."

"Ooh—. That's something. Maybe you should have tried to ask where exactly they're going."

"… Oh well, what are we going to do?"

"Why don't we leave? No one could answer your questions anyway."

"Yup. I was thinking about that too, but let's stay here a bit longer."

"That's fine, but why?"

"The reason's a bit personal…."

"What?"

"Lunch——"

Kino took down the luggage from Hermes and pushed him outside. She was wearing her jacket.

Dried sheets were fluttering beside the entrance. The old woman was crouching by the field, doing something.

Kino stopped Hermes and approached the old woman.

“The potatoes are almost ready. During winter, everybody likes my gratin made from baking potatoes and bacon together in the oven. Maybe I could use some for this evening’s dinner.”

“That… also seems delicious,” Kino said.

“Good grief,” Hermes muttered with a small voice.

The old woman slowly stood up, looked at the sky, and searched for the sun. She looked at a particular point in the sky.

"Just perfect. Miss Kino, Mister Hermes, I want to show you something wonderful and rare. Please follow me," she said to Kino whose face was a bit surprised.

And without waiting for Kino's response, she walked briskly towards the forest. Kino pushed Hermes and followed in confusion.

—

Inside the forest, there was a path wide enough for one person to walk through. Kino followed the old woman while pushing Hermes along.

After a while, they arrived at a clearing and a scenery opened up before their eyes.

"Wow…"

"Amazing!"

Kino and Hermes exclaimed in wonder at the same time.

The place where the old woman finally stopped at was the cliff edge of an enormous valley. There was no ground right in front of them. The cliff has a steep angle, and was located at a tremendous height. The distance from the cliff to the other side of the valley was uniform.

When they carefully peeked at the bottom, they saw a lake. The long and narrow stretch of the lake had bright green water.

“This is amazing. It must be a valley formed by a glacier a long time ago,” Kino said.

“Who would have known there’s something like this nearby? It’s the end once you fall in. Be careful with your speed next time,” Hermes said.

Kino nodded in agreement and spoke to the old woman.

“So this beautiful view is what you wanted to show us.”

The old woman smiled and shook her head. “No. What I wanted to show you was something else.”

Kino made a dubious expression, while the old woman looked towards the sun once more.

“It’s about time. Please observe the bottom of the valley closely.”

Kino stopped Hermes by the cliff as much as she could , and then looked below.

The green of the lake slowly lightened up, as if it was being absorbed.

“?”

And then the lake became perfectly transparent, revealing the bottom of the valley.

“!”

“Kino! That’s!”

Kino gasped while Hermes exclaimed.

The bottom of the valley was illuminated by the bluish light passing through the water. It was a splendid city. There was a stretch of road networks lined up with a number of stone houses and apartments. More than half were crumbled remains of tall buildings and structures that looked like enormous factories, with holes opened on the roof. The city was enclosed with tall and thick walls built side by side.

"It's a country…," Kino muttered.

The woman spoke in a slow and gentle tone. "It's a country from ancient times. It's really sad; for some reason, this country was destroyed. Only during this time and season, the amount of light would make the water transparent and reveal this scenery."

"……"

"……"

"I am sure there were a lot of people who lived here; people who lived supporting each other. But that was a long time ago."

"……"

“……”

“What do you think? Isn’t it wonderful and rare to see an empty country appear like this?” the old woman asked the speechless Kino and Hermes.

Kino answered, her gaze still fixed at the bottom, “Yes …, I was totally surprised…. Thank you very much.”

“Oh, I’m glad. To think I can actually be a tour guide, too.”

—

When the old woman told them she has to return to work ,

“I want to look at it a bit longer,” Kino said.

“I’ll go back and prepare lunch. Miss Kino, do you like wild rice soup?”

"Ah, yes. I've tried it in various countries before. I particularly like it with chicken."

"That's great. We'll have that for lunch. Please come back when the sun is at its highest."

And then the old woman left. Not long after, the water turned back to its original color.

"Kino, I thought you've noticed, but…"

Kino nodded. "Yeah. This country, or rather, its ruins, are relatively new…."

"Yup. No matter how you look at it, those buildings weren't from ancient times."

While Kino slowly drew Hermes away from the cliff,

"This may be the valley country that we were looking for…, no, it has to be."

"Right. So, it was destroyed. The information must be outdated because you heard of it from a senile old man."

"Even so, it's strange that the old woman doesn't know about it. It doesn't seem like she was lying either… . And even if we ask the family, I doubt they're going to tell us anyway."

"Hide it or go and ask somebody else?" Hermes asked jokingly.

"Neither. We'll leave this place tomorrow."

"Ro—ger… wait, tomorrow? Ah! You wanted to freeload for dinner again." As Hermes figured out the reason on his own,

"Well, my three days isn't over yet," Kino answered resolutely.

—

Kino ate lunch together with the old woman in the kitchen.

Kino ate the wild rice soup together with baked crackers enthusiastically.

On the other hand, the old woman only ate bread baked simply from some leftover dough and soup boiled from scrap vegetables.

"I always have this, so it has become my favorite," she said.

As they were drinking their after meal tea, the woman talked proudly about the family.

The master was a very important person in the food company he works for, while the wife works very hard in a machine manufacturing company and sometimes comes home later than the husband. The young master does well in his studies and was popular at school.

The old woman told Kino how happy she was to work as a mechanical doll for this kind of family.

After a short break,

“Now, to make sure everyone has a nice home to return to, I have to do the cleaning,” the old woman said and quickly stood up. Right after, she pressed on her head, as if it throbbed painfully.

“Are you okay? Maybe you should rest for a bit,” Kino said, and tried to get the old woman to sit down.

“Yes, I’m fine. Maybe I need a little bit more grease? ——Well, it’s time to clean,” the old woman said with a smile and slowly stood up. She put the tableware in the sink and went out of the kitchen.

—

“It’s a good opportunity to stay for one more night.”

“Oh dear. And then?”

Kino was in front of the entrance, doing Hermes' maintenance. She was tightening up screws and bolts on various parts, and applying grease where it was needed. Afterwards, she polished his headlights and tank.

"There, it's perfect," Kino said as she finished wiping everything.

"It's not 'perfect', Kino. My speedometer's still broken, " Hermes complained.

"I know how you feel, but fixing a speedometer is beyond me. We'll have to go to a watchmaker for that," Kino said, and Hermes sighed.

"*Sigh*…. I'll have to endure this for a while."

—

Kino pushed Hermes and returned to the room. They were just in time to see the old woman cleaning and putting the bed in order.

"Oh, I see Mister Hermes has also become clean."

"Thanks. But you see——" Hermes complained and explained his dilemma. Then the old woman spoke in a casual tone,

"Can I take a look at the problem?"

"Eh?"

"Huh?"

"I'm used to detailed work, you see. Besides I'm a mechanical doll, so… Anyway, wait here for a bit, my master should have tools here somewhere."

Then the old woman went out of the room and came back holding tools.

"Um, well, for the time being… If it's no good, then it's fine, so…"

As Hermes said this, the old woman disassembled the speedometer and examined the numerous tiny gears inside. And then,

"Ah, a gear was out of place," she said without a care. Hermes expressed his wonder,

"Amazing!"

"… Uh, can you fix it?" Kino asked. The old woman moved around a pair of tweezers like an expert watchmaker. And then,

"There. I think that should do it," she said immediately and put together the disassembled parts.

"Let's try it, Kino." Kino pushed Hermes. The meter worked without a cinch.

"……"

Kino said nothing, and looked at the old woman.

"Wow! Amazing! Grandma, thank you so much!" Hermes said in high spirits.

"I somehow managed to do it. I'm really glad to be of help," the old woman said in a very satisfied tone.

"Now then, I'll have to make preparations for dinner."

—

“——I still couldn’t believe what we have seen today.”

“But she fixed it perfectly. Ah, I feel so refreshed.”

“I wonder who she really is, that old woman.”

“Who knows? What if she really is a mechanical doll? Then things would make sense.”

“Impossible.”

“Impossible, it is. But,”

“But what?”

“It doesn’t sound like a good thing to say, but she really is one useful person.”

“Yeah——”

During dinner, Kino cleaned up her plate while the family threw everything away, as usual.

Kino asked about the country at the bottom of the lake. However,

“Too bad, but we don’t know anything about it because it’s so old,” was the only answer given to her.

Kino then told them that she’ll definitely be leaving by tomorrow, and thanked them for everything.

“I see. Tomorrow huh…,” the man mumbled.

The next day, that is, the morning of the third day since Kino arrived in this house.

Kino woke up at dawn. She did her light exercises and went outside. The sky was so clear it was almost transparent.

Kino went to the kitchen, but the old woman was not there. She was not in the dining or the living room either.

She went to the old woman’s room and opened the door slightly. Kino peeked inside.

The old woman was collapsed on the floor right before the door.

“!”

Kino rushed to her and slowly raised her up. The old woman’s eyes were closed, and she was letting out long and thin gasps of air.

Kino raised the old woman and laid her on the bed.

“Grandma, can you hear me?”

The old woman opened her eyes slightly. “Oh…, Miss Kino.”

"I found you collapsed in front of your door. Are you aware of your body's condition?" Kino asked, and the woman answered.

"Yes…, I know it all so well…. It seems like it's time for this machine to break down…. Please, Miss Kino. I have to say goodbye to them. Will you take me to where everybody is…?"

"No, I'll call them. You are in no condition to be moved around. I'll come back right away!" Kino said, turned on her heels and opened the door of the room. There were three people standing in the corridor.

"!"

The family entered the room without saying anything.

Kino gaped at them for a while and then ran back to her own room and tapped Hermes awake.

She came back to the room pushing Hermes along. The three where standing beside the bed, looking down at the old woman quietly. Kino set Hermes on his center stand behind them.

The old woman spoke in a small voice. "Everyone… everyone…"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Yes."

The three replied one after the other.

The old woman slowly opened her eyes. And while looking at the vacant space between the husband and the wife, she asked,

"Have I… been of use… to all of you…?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Yup."

The man, his wife, and their son said as they nodded.

The old woman smiled very slowly.

"Oh, that's good… to know…," she muttered weakly.

Slowly, she exhaled quietly and lengthily, and closed her eyes.

And stopped moving.

—

Kino placed her fingers on the old woman’s throat. The three only stood quietly.

“She has passed away,” Kino said.

“Yes,” the man replied.

“She was a human after all?” Kino asked in confirmation, and the man turned to Kino.

“Yes,” was all he said, with a sad expression on his face.

“Well, I don’t believe mechanical dolls could really exist anyway,” Hermes said.

“What are you planning to do now?”

The man answered Kino’s question,

“We’ll bury her. You can help if you like.”

—

Kino and the others wrapped the old woman’s body in sheets.

Afterwards, the man took the hourglass from the kitchen and laid it side by side with the hands of the old woman folded on top of her chest.

—

“Please follow me,” the man said. Together with his wife, they got the body out of the house on a stretcher. The son

had a big rucksack on his back, and carried four shovels in his hand with ease.

Inside the deciduous forest, there was a path wide enough for one person to walk through. Kino followed the old woman while pushing Hermes along.

After a while, they arrived at a clearing and a scenery opened up before their eyes. The morning sun shined on the magnificent valley. The light shined diagonally on the green water of the lake.

They laid the body down and started to dig a hole near the cliff, in a place where the lake could be seen very well . Kino followed suit.

When the grave was ready, the man took the corpse in his arms, entered the hole, and gently laid it down. The son opened the rucksack and took out a human skull from inside.

It was a slightly yellowed skull of an adult. Its left side was violently broken. The man placed it carefully beside the old woman’s head. Then the son took out another, smaller skull. This time, it was a child’s. The man put it beside the old woman’s head as well.

The man turned to Kino and spoke, "Her husband and son."

The man went out of the hole, handed out the shovels, and started to dump soil on the grave. The wife and the son proceeded silently.

Kino also began to work on the other side.

For a while, only the cries of birds, the leaves rustling from the wind, and the sound of earth filling up a hole, could be heard.

—

Kino stood in front of the fresh grave, opening her eyes from a long, silent prayer. Her mouth moved a little, but no voice came out.

Kino turned to the family. "We'll have to excuse ourselves now. Thank you for letting us stay."

The man smiled lightly and opened his mouth to speak.

"Miss Kino, don't you want to know?"

"Know what?"

"As to 'who' she was, 'what' we are, and 'where' that place at the bottom of the lake belonged to."

"……"

Kino fell silent for a moment.

"What do you say? We can answer all of your questions, Miss Kino," the wife smiled a little, and spoke with a clear voice.

"… I would love to know," Kino said.

"Me too!" Hermes chimed in happily.

The son's eyes brightened up, and with a vivid expression,

"It's going to be a rather long story. Is that all right with you, Miss Kino?" he said with the tone of an adult.

"Y-yes…, I don't mind," Kino said, slightly surprised.

The man, woman, and child, looked at each other and smiled.

"But first, look at this," the man said as he placed both of his hands on the son's head. He turned it twice to the left, and lifted it from the rest of the body.

"!"

Kino's face convulsed for a moment. The son's laughing head was connected to its body with a number of thin tubes.

"D-don't tell me… everyone's…"

"Yes," the wife said. And then with her right hand, she removed her left, and let it dangle. The man replaced the son's head, and removed his own.

"Mechanical dolls?"

The man answered Kino’s question by making his head nod with his hands.

Kino exhaled deeply, her eyes still wide open.

“Wow, I’m surprised! But you sure are well-made!” Hermes said happily.

—

Kino sat beside Hermes, who was set on his center stand.

“Now that I know ‘what’ you are, kindly tell me ‘who’ she was and ‘where’ that city belonged. And if you can, please tell me ‘why’, as well.”

“I understand. Let us explain first about that country,” said the male mechanical doll who remained standing.

“You must have heard rumors about a rare country in the middle of a long and narrow valley…, but you weren ’t aware that it was an extinct country torn between two races which were in constant struggle against each other,

” said the female mechanical doll who remained standing .

“At times, political confrontations would result in bloodshed. Even so, people lived in it, either from the illusion that things would stabilize someday, or from the reality that they have no other place they could go to,” said the child mechanical doll who remained standing.

“She was born and raised in such a country. Miss Kino , do you want to know her name?”

Kino shook her head in response to the three people who stiffly stood, lined up near the edge of the cliff.

“Fifty years ago, she was a doctor of mechanical engineering in that country. She was thirty years old at the time. In that world, she was known as ‘a genius that comes only once in several hundred years’,” said the male mechanical doll.

“So that’s why she was able to fix Hermes.”

“I see.”

Kino and Hermes muttered.

"Yes. If it's her, she could probably make all of the parts of a motorrad by herself. Even the parts a hundred times smaller inside the engine; she can make them move perfectly," said the female mechanical doll.

"……"

"Wow."

"She became unsatisfied with the research sponsorship she received and decided to build her own research facility. Her aim was to create mechanical dolls. Machines which looked exactly like humans, that work for humans, are yet to be created——," said the child mechanical doll.

"She thought, 'Mechanical dolls will free humans from work. And as a result, everyone will have spare time to resolve their differences; then the quarrels thus far will all be a thing of the past,'" said the male mechanical doll.

"She immersed herself into her research. But even with her abilities, creating mechanical dolls of the quality she desired was no simple task. She spent days on end in her research facility, and had very little time to spend with

her beloved husband and son. We witnessed this while we were inside our cases,” said the female mechanical doll.

“From time to time, she would look sadly at the picture of her family. Even so, she carried on with her research. And finally, her efforts bore fruit when she completed three mechanical dolls that function perfectly, ” said the child mechanical doll.

“I see.”

“That’s the three of you.”

The male mechanical doll confirmed. After that, he continued hesitantly.

“She embraced us happily. She put us in her car in a hurry, and took us to her apartment, to the place where the people whom she wanted to share the success of her research before anyone else, waited. ‘They’ll be surprised . I managed to finish just in time,’ she said happily…. But when we arrived, the apartment was no longer there. In its place was a mountain of rubble, the traces of a big explosion. It was a terrorist bombing born from the feud of the two opposing races.”

"……"

"……"

The female mechanical doll narrowed her eyes and continued. "She jumped out of the car and ran to the mountain of debris. She looked at the corpses lined up beside it and found her husband, with part of his head crushed, and her son, whose lower body was missing. Then, she turned to us and laughed, 'Now, everyone. My husband and son are waiting. Let's celebrate!" ——She went inside the apartment without a moment's delay. The rubble collapsed on her. We saved her and took her to the research facility to treat her injuries. Her life was out of danger, but it took several days for her consciousness to return. However, she was not the same person who created us…."

The child mechanical doll continued, his face having the expression of someone who was about to cry.

"When she regained consciousness, the first thing she told me was, 'What time is it?' I answered promptly, and she reacted with, 'Oh, my. Master's going to be home soon. I have to make dinner.' She then tried to get up with her injured body. We immediately gave her a shot

of tranquilizer. But when she opened her eyes for the second time, she asked us, 'Are you the family that I serve?' She asked a number of times, until finally, we responded, 'Yes, that's right. But right now, you are still in the middle of production. So you have to wait for a while.' ——No matter how much we tried to fix her and examine every nook and cranny of her brain, we couldn't find out how she became like this. If only she were a mechanical doll, we could pinpoint the exact place with the problem."

"… And then, what happened?" Kino asked.

The male mechanical doll looked at the other two mechanical dolls, and spoke as their representative.

"And then, while we were waiting for her to recover physically, the fighting between the two sides escalated. Every day, there would be terrorist bombings, and the other side would retaliate in a similar fashion. We felt that her body would soon be in danger, so we hid her in the basement of her research laboratory. An ugly civil war soon broke out. Eventually, the deafening days which continued on end suddenly came to a halt. The population had decreased rapidly to the point that it could no longer continue as a country. After a while,

groups emerged, living however they wanted and going around killing for food. In the end, everyone left the country. We have no idea about their whereabouts, but seeing that there were no rumors that the country was no longer in existence, probably…"

"I see," Kino nodded.

"We took her with us above ground. She said with a smile, 'My, how chaotic. It would be really worthwhile cleaning this place up.' And so we told her, 'No, we will be moving to a new house. Inside the forest above the valley, there's a really inexpensive place we could live in. There, you will work for us.' ——Since then, for 54 years and 341 days, we have been acting as an artificial family for her."

"I see…," Kino said.

"What about that lake?" Hermes asked.

"To prevent her from recollecting painful memories, we built a dam and submerged the country. The water becoming transparent was not part of our calculations."

"Did you know that her body was getting weaker?"

The mechanical dolls answered Kino's question.

"Yes. We performed a regular scan of her body's condition…. But old age was the only thing we couldn't do anything about.

When everything had been explained, Kino faced the mechanical dolls.

"I don't have anything else I would like to ask. We'll pack up and leave."

At that moment, the three mechanical dolls spoke all at once.

"We were made by her. To work for the sake of humans, yes, to work for her. And so, our mission has come to an end…. But, that was not our only duty! Miss Kino, is there anything you want us to do for you? Just

say it. If we don't do anything for humans, then there is no reason for us to exist! Just continuing to exist will be very painful!"

Kino answered, "No, there's nothing."

"Please don't say such things! There must be something! We can be of assistance to you. We can be someone you need. We can be your friends, parents, children, lovers, or enemies."

"……. I am not interested. I'm sorry," Kino answered expressionlessly, just as before.

"Don't you have someone you truly need from the bottom of your heart?" asked a monotonous voice.

"Right now, there's no one. Well, except for myself."

"No way! Not having a person important to you, isn't that sad? Isn't that sort of life empty? Humans have to be together with someone. Humans have to live for somebody. If not, wouldn't that be really painful?"

Kino shook her head. "It depends," answered a monotonous voice.

"Please make use of us!"

Kino shook her head once more.

Then they asked, "We can't be of any use to you? We are useless?"

Kino remained silent.

Eventually, they muttered, "Is that so…"

They turned on their heels and slowly walked. Soon the footsteps vanished, and they disappeared from Kino's sight.

After some time, the sound of something hitting the water was heard.

Kino peeked below the cliff.

The three were floating face up on the green water.

The lake slowly cleared up. At the same time, the bodies began to sink.

They sank towards the blue city; their arms wide open as if they were about to fly.

“A Land Not Permitting Discrimination” —True Blue Sky— [6]

Chapter Five

"A Land Not Permitting Discrimination"

— True Blue Sky —

“Anyway, let’s see if we can ask the people around here, Kino.”

“Yeah…. I suppose that’s the best way after all. —— Ah, umm… excuse me?”

“Yes? Oh, you guys aren’t from this country, are you?”

“That’s right. We are travelers. We just arrived in this country.”

“Then, welcome.”

“By the way, there’s something I would like to ask.”

“Sure, what would that be?”

“I’m looking for ×××××[7]. Is there one nearby?”

“……? What did you say just now?”

“I was asking if there’s a ××××× around here.”

“Wait a minute. Are you making fun of people with that sort of job? What in the world are you trying to pull? !”

"Eh? No. I'm just looking for ×××××."

"Ah! What a thing to say…. Hey traveler! If you insult these people any further, I will not forgive you!"

"……"

"Kino?"

"… Uh, if that's the case, then let me rephrase it."

"By all means! That's what I want you to do!"

"Let's see. Isn't there a ××××× in this country? Or, is there a ××××× here? That is all I want to know."

"… Truly, what a thing to say! You are such a terrible person! To say it in such a manner, do you not realize the pain you cause them? Wait, everyone come here! Everyone come!"

"Oh? What's the matter?" "What?" "What's with the loud voice?" "Why?" "What is it?"

"Listen everyone. Just now, this traveler said some outrageous things! She used ugly discriminatory words over and over again! Unforgivable!"

"You don't have to shout just because of that…. Uh, is it you? Are you the traveler this lady here was talking with just now?"

"Yes, that's right. But it seems like she finds my use of words offensive no matter what I do."

"Hmm. It may be that this lady is just being too sensitive and melodramatic. Well, what is it that you want to know, miss traveler?"

"Umm, I just wanted to ask if there isn't a ××××× here. "

"! W-w-what a thing… Miss traveler, please stop saying such things with a calm face. That is extreme mockery of a specific organization, of a profession!"

"That's…. A ×××××, I'm looking for a ××××× that can do ×××××."

"T-that's enough! If you continue to spit out such careless remarks, we will take action against you!"

"Yeah!" "Cut it out!" "You scum!"

"Huh? Maybe no matter what I do, I will ×××××? What do you think, Hermes?"

"Kino. Perhaps, there's no such thing as a ××××× here? That's why they can't conceive of the idea of ×××××. Whether you use ××××× or ×××××, it's the same as ×××× ×?"

"Aack! Even the motorrad says mean things! They suit each other so well!"

"That's right! You people are trash. You don't deserve to live; your existence should be condemned! There's something wrong with you!"

"Uh, there seems to be a misunderstanding somehow. To rephrase, I was just thinking of a ×××××. Isn't there a ××××× with ×××××?"

"Eeek!" "What a thing to say!" "Didn't I tell you? I was right!" "Hmph, there's nothing we can do, this person's rotten to the core!" "Don't let the children hear!" "Boy, let's go over there."

"This is some trouble…. Hermes, do you know any good words to say?"

"How does '×××××' sound to you?"

"What does '×××××' mean?"

"Eeek—! Terrible! This is too much! You guys sure say such things so casually!"

"Hey damn brat! Stop using such abusive language! Stop this instant! Otherwise!"

"Otherwise?"

"……. Hmph! W-what's that? Are you planning to threaten me with that hand persuader on your hip? Hah! Did you think I would stab you here? Give me a break! I wouldn't do such a thing! It was only by chance that this knife fell from my pocket, and I was just returning it! Don't jump to conclusions. You don't believe a person now? You sad excuse for a human! You a*****e!"

"My goodness! You were thinking of using violence to have your way? You're the worst!"

"That's right. With that sort of attitude, it's likely that up to now, she has killed a lot of people just because they don't agree with her. She thinks nothing of shooting people. This person is a cold-blooded killer!"

"Yeah. If we just keep quiet and listen, she'll say whatever she wants…. Words used without caution are weapons that can hurt people. What a foolish, defective creature."

"Let's understand her pain. Let's go beyond our anger and feel compassion towards this person's prejudiced ideas. I'm sure her parents were trash, and did not teach her what's right from wrong. Or maybe they were very poor and did not have the time for that. The father must be an alcoholic, and the mother must have run off to become somebody else's mistress."

"I see…. Well, I sort of understand what everyone is trying to say. My ××××× is ×××××, I suppose."

"Kino, whichever way you say it, isn't that ×××××?"

"You son of a b***h! To say that again! Leave this moment! Get out of this country! Get out of our sight! We can't allow prejudiced people like you to stay in this

country for even one more second! We would like to tear you to pieces for the sake of the poor people you have insulted, but since we're generous, we'll forgive you if you leave! Accept the mercy of these rational people, and get out of here! Everyone! Let's expel these b******s with our combined forces!"

"That's right! Get out! Get out of here!" "Trash!" " Murderer! Sadist!" "Get out!"

"This brat! Eat this——"

"That would be troublesome. Please stop."

"… W-what are you glaring at? … I-I was just trying to pick up a stone which fell by my feet! Because it might be dangerous if a child trips on it! D-don't get the wrong idea! You crazy b***h!"

"That's right! This man is a kind person! I know that all too well! But it will take someone so skillful in spitting out words and actions that hurt people like you a whole lifetime to understand that!"

"Leave! Leave at once! If you want to die, die outside the country! And then become food for the maggots! This country is too good for prejudiced and violent people like you to breathe in!"

"Yeah, yeah! Do not pollute our country! Do not enter our beautiful country! You disgusting f***k!"

"When I see this person's behavior, I remember a ruthless dictator from long ago who ordered the massacre of tens of thousands of people for the sake of his twisted ideology…. It makes me shiver. I'm sure this person is his reincarnation."

"That's right…. Hey traveler. Get out of this country right now. And know that words can become weapons. But don't come near this country ever again. Do not infect us with your disgusting disease."

"Yeah, get out." "Get out!" "Beat it!" "Leave!" "Please leave now!" "Disappear!"

"… Oh dear. Well, it can't be helped. Please excuse us. Take care, everyone. As for ××××, maybe it's better to ××××."

“Eeek——!” “You had to say that just when you’re about to leave!” “Get out! Get lost!”

“Get lost! Get lost!”

“Well then. ——Let’s go Hermes.”

“Bye-bye everyone!”

—

“——Phew. At last they’re gone. Those guys were hopeless.”

“Yeah. It’s so sad to see that people like that still exist. But they were outsiders after all.”

“That’s right. In our country, there are no such prejudiced people. We can only recognize the good attributes of things. We take everything in a positive light .”

"Anyway, what were the immigration inspectors doing? Why did they let that crazy traveler get an entry permit? Shouldn't a person like that be sent to the hospital instead?"

"Indeed."

"That's true. People only come occasionally, so they should at least do their work properly."

"Well, asking for an intelligent immigration inspector is too much. There's no helping their stupidity."

"Yeah. No one supervises their work, and even though discrimination is such an unforgivable thing, only the immigration inspectors think differently. It can't be helped because they were failures since birth."

"There are so many of them that we can't count them with our fingers, right?"

"Ah, I've also heard about that."

"So stupid."

"Even so, these trash live long. Did you know? Their life expectancy is twice as much as that of an average person."

"That's amazing. I didn't know. How come?"

"Well, that's probably because they don't use their heads. And so they don't age. Having a long life is not necessarily a good thing, though."

"True, true." "You can say that again."

"After all, the inspectors dared live outside the walls, in such a barbaric environment. I've heard before that those guys come into the country only once a month, when they receive their salary and go shopping. The rest of the time they spend outside the walls…. I wonder what they do with their families?"

"Well, they're barbaric by nature. Barbaric people deserve to be in barbaric forests and wastelands."

"Ahaha. Nice one. Civilized living is for civilized people, after all."

"Speaking of which, even if those people decide to get married to a normal person in the country, in most cases they tend to look for a person who has no parents or relatives. Also, they prefer young ones, those who are barely old enough to get married."

"Ah——, oh no. Then that means, if we get married to these people, we can no longer return to the country?"

"So those guys are pedophiles too?" "Disgusting…. They should die."

"Then once they get married, they can only come into the country once a month?"

"Yikes! That's horrendous. I wonder, what sort of lifestyle do they have? Not that I'm particularly interested."

"I heard a rumor that whenever those guys come into the country, they wear hats, masks and gloves, and never take them off even in summer. Now that's extremely creepy. And it seems that they don't reveal their lifestyles even to their closest friends."

"Wow, so terrible."

"Those kinds of humans should never have been born. That's what I think."

"Indeed. In any case, if you were born as an inspector, you'd be one your whole life. That's so crazy. If it were me, I'd commit suicide."

"Well by law, everyone's free to choose their own career. For instance, they can become a teacher inside the country if they want. … Anyway, I don't think those people are fit for other jobs. If one of them said they wanted a normal job, that may be something worth seeing."

"No, I don't want to see it! If an inspector applies for the same job as I have, I'll say 'It's regrettable, but we can 't accept you because the documents were lost accidentally.' I don't want to get contaminated."

"That's only a rational decision by a rational person. I' ll do the same thing. If there was an exam, I'll fail him no matter how high his score was. That's because if an inspector gets hired, the customers will all go away."

"Hey everyone, let's stop this talk about trash. It's a waste of time. Let's just protect our beautiful culture and

carry on with our wonderful lives. There's no need for us at all to sympathize with the needy."

"That's right." "Well said." "I agree."

"Come. Let's return to our lives——"

—

There was a small guard post beside the gates just outside the walls.

Over there, a man was sitting and leisurely reading a book. He was probably around thirty years old. The words 'immigration inspector' was embroidered on the white shirt he was wearing.

Kino knocked on the window of the guard post. The inspector placed the book on top of the desk, stood up and went out through the door.

Kino asked the inspector, "Excuse me. I'll be leaving the country right away. What about the departure procedures?"

"There's no need. You didn't undergo entry procedures either, after all," the inspector said, and grinned, "Well, you probably understand the reason right?"

Kino nodded. "Yes, I understand very well. Up to now , I've been around various places, but this one set a new record for my shortest stay in any country."

"In any case, please don't feel violated. All the people in this country feel like that."

"It sure looks that way. None of them seems to be joking around. Anyway, what is a ×××××, really?"

"Ah. It seems that it was not like that in the past. The leader that time said, 'Because a ××××× is ×××××, we can 't ×××××'. From then on, it's ×××××. Ever since, it has always been ×××××. Probably, ××××× is ×××××."

"I see." "I understand."

Kino nodded, and Hermes murmured with profound emotion.

“Even though you took the trouble to come here, I hope you don’t feel bad.”

“Not at all! It was very interesting,” Kino said with a smile.

“I thought you’d say that. All travelers do,” the inspector said, looking amused.

Kino looked up at the towering walls beside her.

“These walls are also amazing. It’s the first time I’ve seen something like this.”

“Isn’t it?” The inspector nodded and raised his head.

The grey walls the two were looking at had no top. Extended right above it was a gently drawn curve which eventually merges with the walls on the opposite side. The entire country was covered with a concrete dome.[8]

“It was completely enclosed. I was very surprised when I saw the interior.”

"It was like a super-duper humongous egg. When we saw it from afar, we thought it was some sort of a mountain," Hermes said.

"Since when was it like this?" Kino asked.

"Too bad, but I don't know. All we do know is that it might have existed back in my great-great-great-great grandfather's time. It was in one of his remaining drawings."

"Oh…"

Kino looked up at the walls again.

"However, it was such a dirty country, Kino. No, not the people, but the town."

As Hermes said this, the inspector nodded several times.

"Yeah, it's so dirty…. Isn't that terrible? It's like that all over the country. As you can see, on top of the enclosed space, they basically have no sense of hygiene at all. I don't know if you noticed it, but everyone lets their kitchen waste and sewage flow into the street. Upstream the river flowing from the north, the water is clear and

there are many fish, but downstream it becomes pitch black you can no longer tell what's flowing in it. It's untouchable. Inside the houses, there are swarms of rats, and there are also lots of cockroaches."

"What's a 'cockroach'?" Kino asked the inspector.

The inspector spread his thumb and index finger apart .

"It's an insect, but it's about this big. It is flat, oval in shape, and looks greasy. It's often seen coming out of the kitchen."

"Kino, haven't you seen a cockroach before?" Hermes asked.

Kino shook her head. "Nope."

"That's good for you, Miss Kino. It's a pretty disgusting sight whenever you see it crawling around in the dining area or in the bedroom. Well, of course it's like that inside the country. There was a time when I saw a number of them being boiled thoroughly in the hotel cafeteria's serving pot…. Ah, well let's leave it at that."

The inspector shook his head and hands with an anguished expression.

"I see…. Insects which I haven't seen before; it would be nice to see them for a bit," Kino said without changing her expression.

"Stop, stop! In this world, there are things that you're better off not knowing at all. A cockroach is one such thing."

"Is that so?" Kino asked with a straight face.

"Yes, that's right," the inspector said with a wry smile, and then continued. "Well, now that I think about it, I don't know if I can bear living in such a place. I can't stay there long without gloves and a mask. However…, those people will never know the outside world from birth until death. Of course, they think that's the best thing. That's what they were taught as they grew up. People who live in paradise don't dream of new lands."

"I see," Kino said, and turned her gaze at the opposite side of the walls.

The cool breeze blew over the bright green meadows under the clear sky. On both sides of the road due east were neatly trimmed fields. A dark coniferous forest spread out from afar.

Beside a stream a little ways off the walls was the wooden house of the inspector, with its waterwheel turning about leisurely. A woman who seemed to be the inspector's wife was drying laundry. Beside, two children were playing with a swing suspended from a tree.

"It's such a nice place, isn't it?" Kino said.

"Thanks. I also like it here," the inspector said with a sigh.

"Even Kino can live longer if she stays in a place like this forever," Hermes teased.

The inspector chuckled, "That may be true. We inspectors usually don't die before we see the faces of our grandchildren. However, the people inside the country only live long enough to see their children graduate. Most of them die due to disease. It's because of the poor hygiene and the filthy air. Frankly speaking, it's

dangerous in there. They will never be attacked by wild animals or be hit by enemy bullets, but they're in danger nevertheless."

Kino nodded lightly, and looked at the meadows once more.

"There's a detour road along the northern walls. If you arrive in front of the western gates, it will be a good idea to stop by since my older sister and cousin are the inspectors over there. You can find accommodations, portable rations and fuel there. If it's not much of a bother, please tell them my family and I are doing well," the inspector said to Kino who was ready to depart.

"Thank you very much. I'll tell them."

"Thanks for everything."

Kino put on her hat, and when she was about to ride Hermes,

“Miss Kino,” the inspector asked all of a sudden. “What does ‘true blue sky’ mean?”

“Eh?” Kino turned around.

“‘True blue sky’. I’m not referring to its literal meaning ,” the inspector slowly repeated.

“It’s just like a riddle, eh?” Kino said with a wry smile.

The inspector nodded. “Yeah, you can think of it that way. ——The people in the country thinks of the painted interior illuminated with fluorescent lights as their true blue sky. Well…, if the traveler Kino were to be asked the question, ‘What does ‘true blue sky’ mean to you?’ what would be your answer?”

Kino seemed a little troubled for a while, and then,

“… I see. I will answer this. ‘There’s no such thing.’”

“Why is that?” The inspector asked immediately.

Kino answered with a gentle tone, “The sky’s blueness … changes so much depending on the place, time, season and weather. And each one of them was beautiful. In those times I didn’t think much of them, but now that I

recall, I think they're all beautiful. I can't tell you which one is the 'true blue sky' among all of the skies I've seen. … That's why, 'there's no such thing.' The 'me' right now thinks so."

The inspector gazed at Kino as he listened to her. Then , he nodded several times.

"Ah, I see…. There was that sort of answer too…."

Hermes asked the muttering inspector, "Who had?"

"My grandfather," the inspector answered immediately.

Kino gave him a questioning look for a moment. And then,

"I see. You were asked the same question by your grandfather, right?"

"Exactly. It was when my grandfather was on the verge of death. At that time, I was still too young to discern things. He said this: 'It doesn't matter whether you find the 'true blue sky' or not. I asked, 'What are you talking about?' And he said while laughing, 'That's why it doesn't matter whether you understand or not.

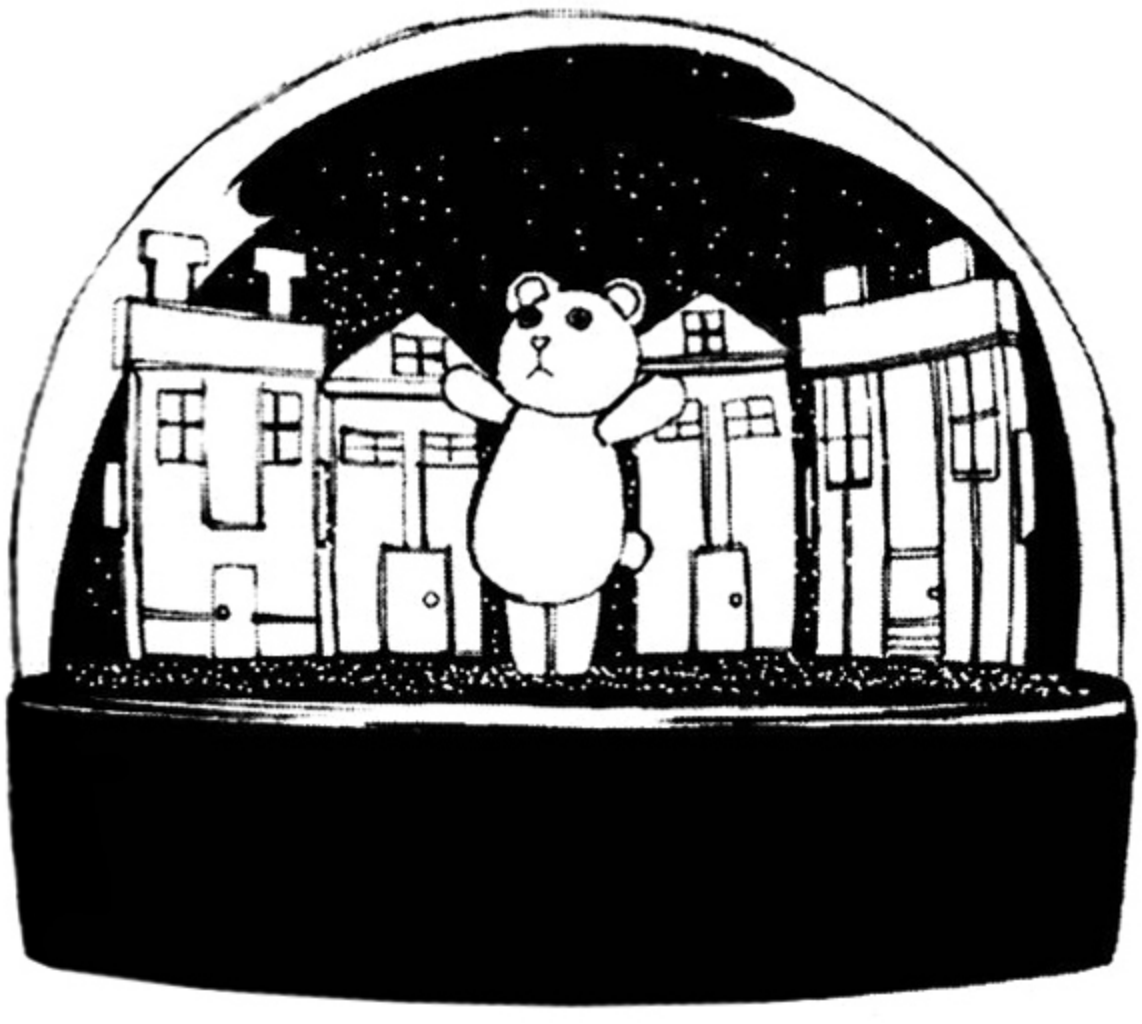
Goodbye, Lügner, my dear grandson.' And then he died …. Since then, I would vaguely think from time to time what 'true blue sky' really means…."

The inspector turned his back to the wall and looked at the blue sky.

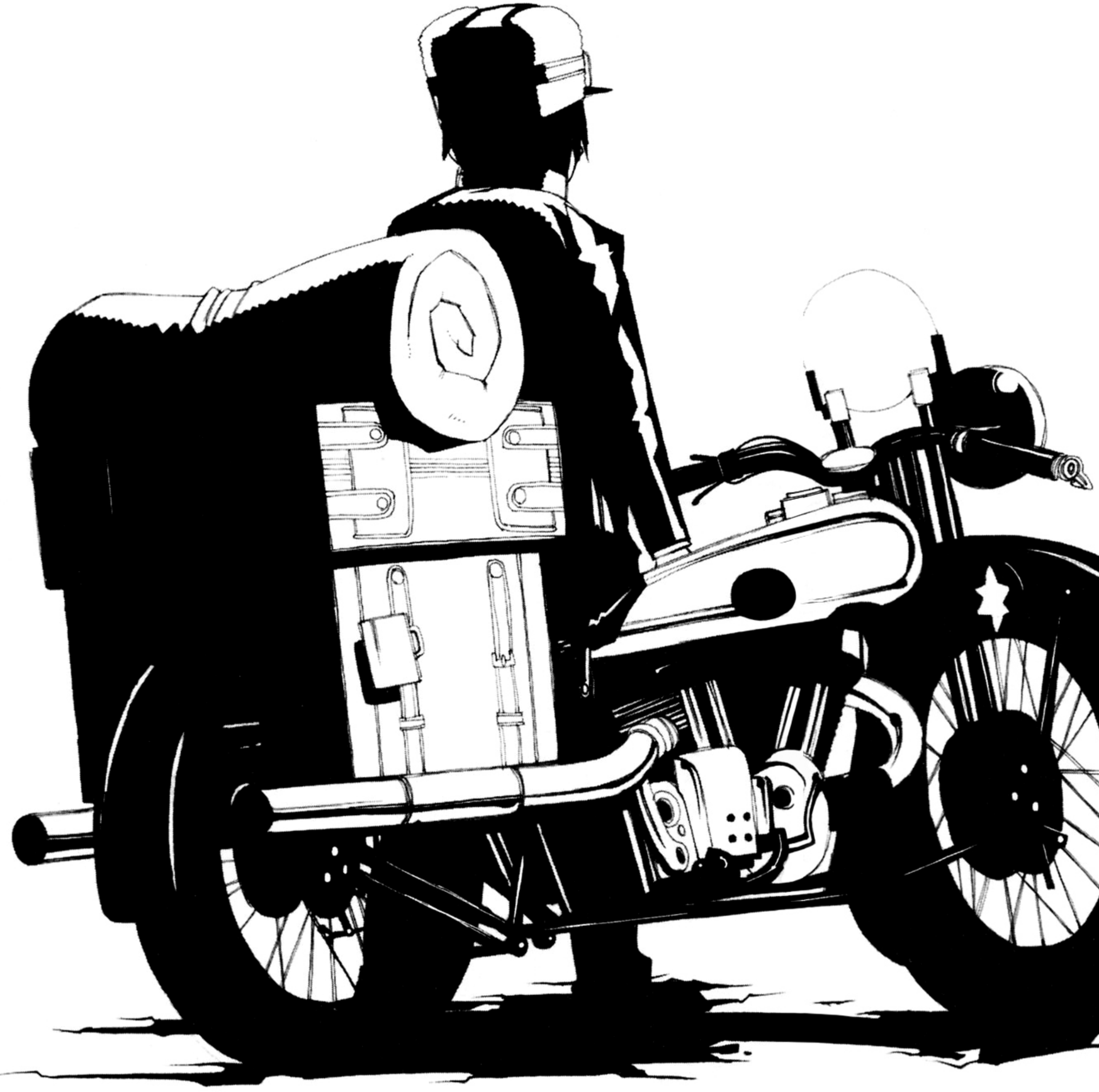
"I don't know if your answer is correct or not. But…, I'm glad I asked you. Thanks," the inspector said, still looking at the sky.

Kino gazed at the same sky, and gently spoke,

"You're welcome. This sky's blue is also very beautiful."



"A Finished Tale" —Ten Years After—



Chapter Six

"A Finished Tale"

— Ten Years After —

It was three in the morning.

I finished my work at last. As always, I tidied up my manuscripts. As always, I put them inside an envelope. And as always, I stowed it inside the lowermost right drawer of my desk. It will be kept that way until my editor comes to pick it up.

I stood up from my chair and slowly stretched as I walked towards the center of the room. I stretched from tip to toe, as if I was trying to make myself taller.

After I made a sound like that of a kitten stuck beneath his four siblings, I felt my strength being sucked out. The fatigue which I have forgotten as I wrote in my desk for ten hours straight suddenly came over my whole body.

I love this feeling of exhaustion.

The way I sank into my bed felt different, as if I were very heavy. If I let myself sink completely, I can let a number of hours pass by without thinking about anything.

If I didn't let myself sink deep enough, my body would feel as if it were floating, and my head would spin

. My mind would inevitably be overrun with various thoughts.

My job right now. My plans for the future. If my thoughts stop with that then it's fine, but if I inadvertently come up with a new story, then it's no use. I will not be able to sleep for a while.

In that case, I will be lying on top of my bed in a strained posture, and if I don't commit into writing the things struggling inside my head one after the other in the notebook always by my side, they might disappear. Once I have finished everything, the sun would have completely risen. My exhausted brain felt admiration to whoever said the words, 'Writers work throughout the day.'

I felt like I have the right to be lazy after completely finishing a story which has taken me so much time. I flopped onto my bed.

Thud! My body rebounded, and slowly but surely, began to sink. My whole body felt heavy, and I don't want to move anymore. Even so, I moved my hand very

slightly to remove my long hair which was blocking my breathing. It's still a bit too early for me to succumb to an eternal sleep.

That's right. I'll go and have my hair cut tomorrow. My hair has grown so much after being neglected for some time.

I suddenly remembered my teens; the time when I still had hair too short for a girl.

A time when I still held a pistol and lived amidst gun smoke.

And I remembered the day when it all suddenly came to an end.

That cheeky motorrad Hermes, I wonder where he is and what he is doing right now?

I wonder what he would say if he sees me right now, completely settled down in one country, and as a popular female author?

That's right. I'll go and have my hair cut tomorrow.

I can't make it as short as that time, but—— tomorrow, I'll go and have my hair cut.

Having decided that much, I finally sank into slumber.

* * *

A single motorrad (Note: a two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) stood on top of the sand.

It was a sandy beach mottled with a rocky area. Various sizes of islands were scattered across the open sea. The waves were calm. The spring sun soaring above the clear sky leisurely warmed the earth.

Away from the shores, the pine trees growing on the sandy beach increased in number. Soon the clump of pine trees became a beautiful, lush grove.

The motorrad was parked midway between the shore and the growths of pine trees.

It was packed full of traveling luggage. There was a box on each side of its rear wheel which was topped by a big bag and a rolled-up sleeping bag. A small wooden board was fastened at the bottom of its protruding side stand so that it would not sink into the sand.

A lone human lay in hiding on the left side of the motorrad facing the sea. It was a young person, around mid-teens. Her blond hair was trimmed short like that of a soldier, and she had beautiful emerald-green eyes.

The jacket and pants she was wearing were full of patches all over, and thick rubber-soled sandals were tightly bound on her legs. She was gripping an automatic hand persuader (Note: A hand persuader is a gun. In this case a pistol). This persuader was installed with something like a rifle's stock, which can be positioned against the shoulders and cheeks when aiming.

With a tensed expression, the human spied with great caution towards the grove before her.

"Hey, I don't know who you are, but I think it's a good idea if you stop," the motorrad said, but the human did not answer. She kept her persuader positioned and her eyes gleaming, trying not to miss anything that moved.

"Well, people may have their own circumstances, but to attack Kino, of all people…," the motorrad spoke again.

"Shut up!"

The human replied harshly, and then, with a tone somewhat softer but still with a hint of nervousness, asked the motorrad,

"So it's Kino, huh? The name of that traveler."

"That's right. And the one you're using in place of a shield is Hermes," the motorrad called Hermes said, and continued with a voice devoid of any tension, "Anyway, it's nice to meet you."

"Ah. I'm Inid… hey, that doesn't matter!" the human called Inid yelled.

"Inid, eh? Nice to meet you," Hermes greeted.

Ignoring this, Inid raised her body a little and peeked from the side of the sleeping bag. With her persuader steady on her shoulder, she aimed towards the woods, and fired. Three dry explosive sounds were heard in succession, and three empty cartridges fell on the sand. It

was an automatic persuader which fires three rounds with one pull of the trigger.

"Tsk!"

As Inid clicked her tongue, Hermes asked, "You missed?"

"Shut up!"

"With skills like that, you will be the one to get shot instead."

Inid laughed scornfully. "That's what you're here for – a shield. If your wheels get shot by mistake, that traveler won't be able to continue traveling, right?"

"I suppose so…. But it's Kino we're talking about here, so…"

The moment Hermes said this, the sound of something cutting through the air was heard. Part of the sleeping bag burst open, and the feathers that it contained fluttered in the air. The bullet passed just above the ear of Inid as she tried to peek again. Her blond hair was showered with white feathers.

"… I'm sure she would fire without a second thought, just as you've seen."

"……"

Inid's face stiffened, and took refuge behind Hermes' engine.

"If you don't do something soon, Inid…"

"D-don't say my name as if we're close!" Inid cried out while lowering her head as much as she could, and swore under her breath.

"Why attack a traveler anyway? Just so you know, Kino's not rich."

"It doesn't matter. What's important is that I get to attack and steal from someone."

"What's that about?"

Without answering, Inid swiftly raised her head, and while chasing something moving inside the forest with her gaze, fired several times in a row. Three rapid-fired rounds, five times. Fifteen loud shots echoed in the beach .

After firing, Inid quickly lay down, dropped the empty magazine, pulled a fresh one out of her breast pocket and slapped it into the persuader.

"Damn! He escaped into the woods!"

"You missed again? You're pretty bad at this…," Hermes said frankly.

"I told you to shut up!" Inid retorted angrily.

"Well, calm down. Nothing good comes from being impatient in a fight."

"I-I don't want to be told off by someone like you…. But I suppose you're right…."

Inid took a big breath and lightly shook her head.

"Well, why are you attacking travelers again?" Hermes asked, and Inid replied immediately,

"To be recognized as a member."

"Of what?"

Inid remained prostrate, and while keeping the persuader's sight aligned with her gaze,

"Pirates. The pirates controlling this area have a custom. There is a test for anyone who wants to become a pirate, to be given on their fifteenth birthday. On that day, you have to attack the first person you caught sight of, and steal their belongings. Kill if you have to. If you can't do this, you can never become a pirate your whole life."

"Oh, I see. But what if your opponent is abnormally strong? What if they fight back?"

"That will have to depend on your luck…. Luck is also important for a pirate. That is also being tested here."

"Oh, I see," Hermes said with admiration.

"As for me, today is that day. I will bring down that traveler and be acknowledged. I will follow my father's footsteps, and become captain someday. And so… I can't let my boat sink with just the first row!" Inid said furiously with a stern face.

"Hmm… you're quite desperate."

"So be it. I've lived for this day…. I will win no matter who my opponent is!"

Inid tightened her grip on her persuader. With her emerald-green eyes, she glared into the woods through the gap between Hermes' engine and frame.

"Now, come out. You've been making me wait forever …," muttered Inid.

After three seconds, something red disturbed Inid's left eye. She turned away her face in confusion. A single red dot of light now lingered on the top of her shoulder, at the place where her eyes had been earlier. The laser sight cut through the tiny gap between the engine and the frame.

"!"

Inid quickly moved her body away from this gap. At the same time, a shot rang in the forest.

The bullet did not hit Hermes. Neither did it hit Inid. It hit the wooden board propped beneath Hermes' stand, and sent it flying.

"Whoa!" Hermes cried out. His stand sank into the sand, and he began to collapse on his left side.

"Ah!" Inid twisted her body to avoid the bag and the sleeping bag which suddenly started to fall towards her face. She eluded a direct hit on her head from these objects, but in exchange, she was pinned underneath Hermes. Face up, both legs under the engine, and her right hand beneath the luggage, together with the persuader.

"How mean…," the collapsed Hermes mumbled.

"Ugh!"

Inid frantically tried to crawl her way out, but her left hand only dug out sand. She pushed at Hermes, but he barely moved.

"Damn! You're so heavy! Get off me, you!" Inid shouted.

"Don't make me do the impossible," Hermes said.

While looking at the sky, Inid put all of her strength into pushing Hermes off. Somehow he budged a little, and when she thought she could finally free her left leg from under the engine,

"!"

The sky became dark. Someone was looking down at Inid. She couldn't see this person's face because of the sunlit background, but this person's right hand was aiming a high-caliber revolver towards her. The red light which should have been aimed at Inid was pointing towards her knees.

"Damn… you tricked me…. You had two guns…," Inid muttered feebly, her face blank with astonishment.

The person slightly raised her face. It was also a young person in her mid-teens, with short, unkempt, black hair, and wearing a black jacket.

"Are you okay, Hermes?"

"I'm fine, but I'm not sure about your sleeping bag. What about you, Kino?" Hermes asked in return. The person called Kino answered, her aim still trained towards the person trapped underneath Hermes.

"I suppose so."

"That's great. Well, hurry and raise me up."

"Before that…"

Kino slowly dropped her glance and stared back at the emerald-green eyes trained at her.

"Hmph! If you're going to shoot, do it quick!" Inid spat.

"Kino, let me introduce you."

Hermes explained Inid's circumstances in plain and simple terms.

"I see. So that's why you suddenly attacked us. A test to be acknowledged, eh…," Kino said. Hermes, who was still on the ground, effected an air of importance,

"Yup. A 'right-of-way', so to speak."

"……. Um, *'rite of passage'*?"

"Yeah, that's it," Hermes said and fell silent.

"You're getting worse lately, Hermes. That didn't even sound the same," Kino replied in amazement.

"… Really? Well, it's fine as long as you get it. Languages are just like that."

"But it takes me a long time before I get it. So——"

"Is that so? But in terms of improving your ability to recall things, my contribution is ——"

In the middle of the serious discussion Kino and Hermes were having,

"You guys! Don't ignore me!" Inid swore from below.

Kino returned the revolver in the holster in her right thigh. She picked up Inid's persuader, removed the magazine, and disassembled it in no time. Then she tossed everything in a distance. She took out a string from the overturned bag and bound the hands and feet

of Inid, who was gnashing her teeth in anger. Afterwards , she pulled out Inid free.

Kino raised Hermes and tried to somehow balance his stand using the fragments of the wooden board. In the meantime, Inid tried to pull on the ropes with her teeth to escape.

As Kino was finally able to prop Hermes up, Inid forcibly tore away the strings and charged towards Kino.

“Eat this!”

Kino quickly dodged Inid’s right straight, and at the same time, grabbed Inid’s collar with her right hand. Inid was thrown down to the ground face up. With her elbow , Kino brought down her entire body weight towards the pit of Inid’s stomach.

“Guh!”

Inid let out an unpleasant yelp and fainted in agony. Kino laid her sideways and bound her hands behind.

“Good grief…”

As Kino mumbled, Hermes teased, “She has guts. You should follow her example, Kino.”

After coughing up several times, Inid sat up. She then turned her face filthy with sand and tears towards Kino.

“Kill me! Kill me right now! If I can’t become a pirate, it’s better for me to die! Kill me! You can’t now, you chicken?!”

“You heard her, Kino. What are going to do?”

Kino glanced at Hermes, and then shook her head with a sullen look.

“Kill me! Are you going to leave it like this?! You bastard! Take responsibility and kill me!”

Still ignoring Inid, Kino went to the woods and retrieved her other persuader. The automatic hand persuader was tied to a tree branch, a long string attached to the switch of the laser sight. Kino removed the string and put the persuader back in the holster behind her waist.

When she returned, Kino found Hermes chatting with the downcast Inid.

"—And so, like I'm saying, luck was not on your side this time. Luck, you hear? Luck. You said it yourself, didn't you? 'That is being tested here, too.' You don't have to be that dejected; well I suppose you couldn't help it. That's all you've aimed for your whole life, after all, so I just can't go about and tell you not to feel down. But that's that, and you just have to accept it. It's not like your whole life is over, and maybe in your future choices , luck will be on your side. Something good may be in store for you in the future——"

"Shut up…, shut up…" Inid would occasionally mutter in between sobs.

Hermes paid no heed and continued, "See, there are times when motorrads have to change riders. When that happens, the driving style and treatment sometimes change drastically, it becomes unbearable. But that's like a motorrad's fate, and there's nothing we can do about it. Perhaps humans are the same too——"

As Kino sighed, she noticed a small ship appear from the shadow of an island. The ship headed towards their

direction in full speed. She could see several silhouettes of men aboard the ship.

"That is…," Kino said, and Hermes paused his consoling speech to say,

"Yup. They look like Inid's mates."

Kino nodded. "Just in time. Let's escape?"

"Sure."

Kino removed the hat and goggles inserted on her belt, and wore them. She straddled Hermes, and when she was about to start the engine,

"Traveler! Please wait! We have no intention of doing you any harm!" A loud voice echoed from the ship through a megaphone.

"It's our law to make amends to those who got dragged into this rite and survive! Please wait!"

The voice and the ship approached.

"What are you going to do, Kino?" Hermes asked.

"Well, just to make sure…"

As Kino tried to start Hermes' engine,

"It's a law…. Pirates are not supposed to lie…," Inid, her head still hung down, said with a sigh.

"……"

Kino got off Hermes and unfastened Inid's binds. Inid placed her hands before her, but remained seated weakly .

The ship ran aground the beach. All seven men aboard were shouldering persuaders, but none of them looked aggressive.

First, they surrounded Inid, crouched, and anxiously asked her if she was hurt. Inid did not look at their faces, and only shook her head.

A bearded, middle-aged man approached Kino and spoke, "Traveler, I am the captain. Just like I told you before, I want you to take these."

The captain took a handful of gold and silver treasures from the bag hanging from his shoulder, and handed them to Kino.

Kino declined the offer, explaining that carrying things which originally belonged to other people might cause suspicion.

When the captain insisted to take responsibility, Kino asked him if he could share some fuel or ammunition.

The captain ordered one of the men to fetch some fuel cans from the ship. Kino filled Hermes tank until it was full.

“Thank you very much,” Kino said to the captain, who shook his head.

“I am the one who should be thanking you. It’s really frustrating that that child couldn’t become one of us, but it was thanks to you that she could go on living….” then he asked Kino, “After you tied her up, you could have killed her if you had so wanted. I believe someone of your skill will not hesitate to kill an enemy right before your eyes. And yet, you didn’t. Why is that?”

Kino looked at Inid who remained crouched on the ground, weeping. The filthy men around her were crying together with her. Kino looked at the captain's face, and spoke.

"I don't know."

"I see…"

Then the captain, eyes blurred with tears, muttered,

"That child is lucky. Very lucky… Let's just leave it at that."

* * *

Thus, on that day ten years ago, I wasn't able to become a pirate. Thus, I came to live in a completely different world. It was the same, but at the same time, different world. The fact that I couldn't stay in that world made my heart heavy.

I continued to cry as I listened to the motorrad leaving, as I boarded the ship, and until we reached our hideout.

Everyone was so kind. No one criticized me, laughed at me, or tried to hide their disappointment with smiles. I felt like killing anyone who would do so, but everything went well in the end.

Even so, I went to an uninhabited island on my own without asking permission. It was a small island without any food or water. I spent about fifty days there alone.

I did nothing but sit around the whole day in a daze. I thought that I might as well die from starvation. I might have really died for real, if it were not for everyone stealthily placing food and water near me. I am truly grateful to everyone.

After that, I was taken in by a nearby country that secretly supported pirates, as required by law for those who fail the rite of passage. There I started to live a normal life. For the first time in my life, I went to school and studied.

Learning about new things became my diversion.

I finished school much earlier than I thought, and was hired in a publishing company much easier than I anticipated.

It was much more fun than I expected. I ignored books until then, but I became fond of reading them. In time, I found myself wanting to write them, and soon it became my job.

I would never know whether the work I have right now is more worthwhile than a pirate's.

From time to time, when I see recurrent news or rumors about pirates, my whole body would give out a sense of yearning for that other world, of which I am no longer part of.

But even so… the current me, and not her[9], is who I am. And it will remain that way.

Ever since, I would check every single person who comes

into the country; but no motorrad called Hermes, or a traveler called Kino ever appeared.

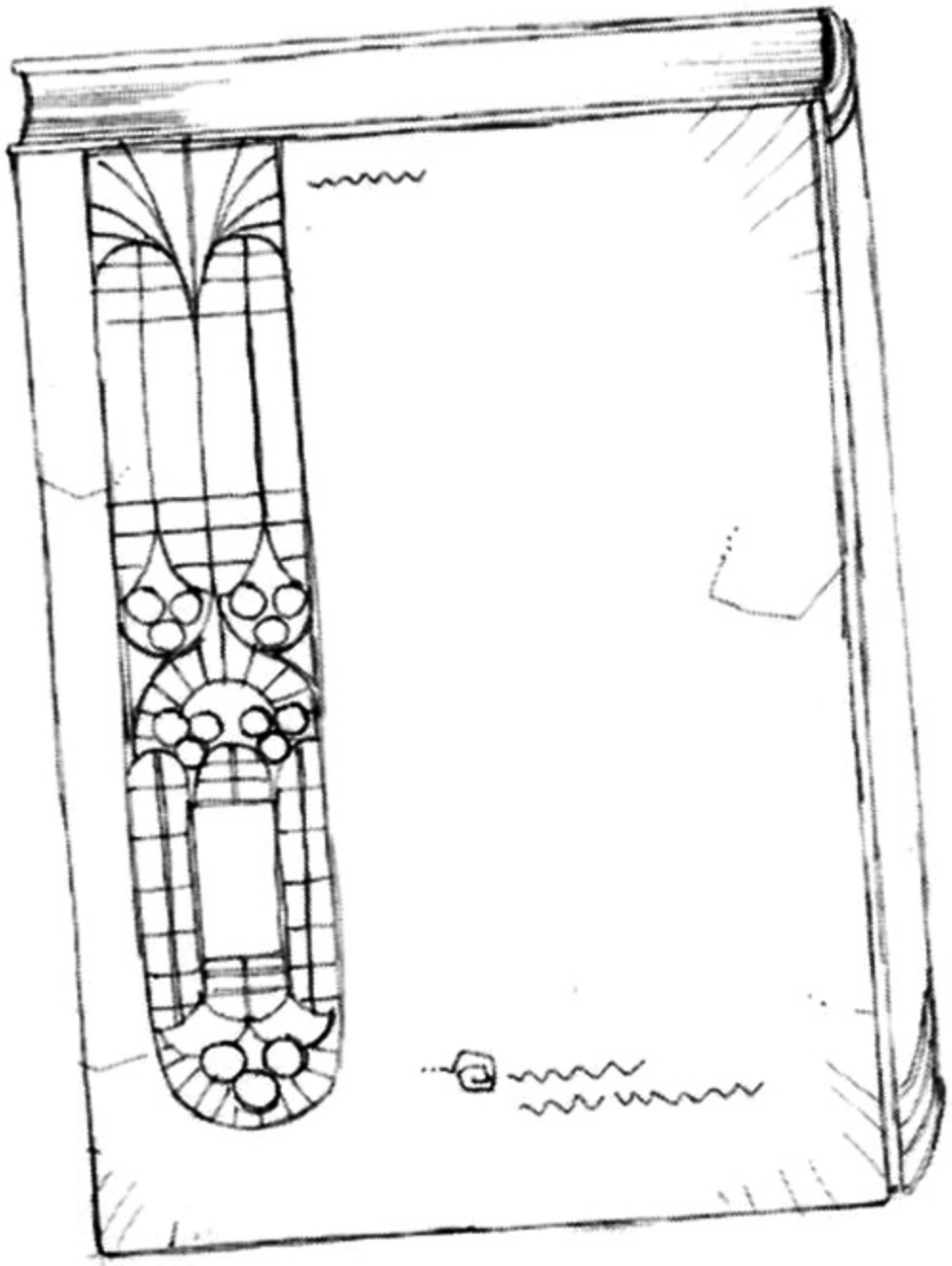
I would surely welcome them if ever they did come.

There's no way they could have been attacked and killed by bandits somewhere, right?

Well, at least for them, such thing is not possible.

Now, I'll go and have my hair cut.

I can't make it as short as that time, but I'll go and have my hair cut.



"Amidst the Clouds" —Blinder・a—

It was a mountainous region.

The lined up mountain peaks which pointed towards the sky still had snow in some places.

There was a stream of melted snow on the gently spreading slopes at the foot of the mountain. It created a little pond of water, where there were brightly colored leaves and flowers of highland vegetation. Overlooking ahead was a sea of clouds, and the earth below could not be seen.

A road was running along the slope. It was a wide, well-maintained road.

Between the road and the mountain scenery, there were humans lying in a heap. There were adults and children, about thirty in all. There were two trucks loaded with traveling luggage parked beside them.

From a distance, Kino was looking at the scene with a scope. Her brown coat fluttered as the wind blew.

"How was it?" asked Hermes, who was parked on the road a little bit away from Kino.

Kino said shortly, "No one is moving."

"Were they killed? By a bandit or something?"

Kino shook her head while peeking at her scope, " Everybody died with foams coming out of their mouths. Besides, because their faces were green from discoloration, probably…"

"Probably?"

"They did not know."

"Huh? Did not know what?" Hermes asked. Kino stopped peeking, pulled some grass growing beneath her feet, and showed it to Hermes.

"A similar variety of this grass grows in other places, but there is a type which only grows in high regions. They did not know that, and they boiled and ate them like usual——"

Kino threw away the grass and looked at the group of corpses from afar. "Those people, they did not know. … It was last night, probably."

"Oh— and they all died, eh?" Hermes said with an amazed and impressed tone.

Kino narrowed her eyes a bit, "It's not something I'd love to see," she whispered.

"Then why don't you just close your eyes?" Hermes teased. At the same time, a strong wind blew, and the hem of Kino's coat rustled violently.

Kino held down her coat. As she looked towards the foot of the mountain, a big white cluster rushed up. Kino, Hermes and the corpses were engulfed in a moment.

It became pure white.

A Tale of an Afterword —Preface—[10]

The world has no afterword.

* * *

And then, an afterword was born.

There was absolutely no punch line.

Neither meaning nor theme could be seen.

Only the slow turning of pages could be heard.

"That's right…, I suppose, but…"

Suddenly, the voice of a human was heard. It was slightly high-pitched, and was like that of a young boy.

"But?"

Another voice asked, encouraging the first to continue. It was a rather boyish voice.

There was a silence for a while, and then the first voice gently continued. Its tone was like that of someone convincing himself of something and it was directed towards a deserted place.

"Is an afterword something that is needed from time to time? Is it a completely useless piece of article? Is it a completely unnecessary part? I don't completely understand why, but there are times when I feel this way . There are times when I am certain of it…. But during those times, I can't help but feel that everything's beautiful and fantastic, be it the text, the illustrations, or the frontispiece. Everything seems dear to me…. The afterword makes everything else more and more appealing, and I figured, unreasonable though it may be, that the afterword has to be placed at the end of the book for that reason."

And after a short interval, continued,

"Painful things, sorrowful things and jokes, that were cut off, can always be included in an afterword. Definitely, I have lots of such things left to write."

"Uh-huh."

"And that's why I don't think I can stop from writing afterwords. It's so much fun that I would still continue even if I had to expose my foolish side. Besides,"

"Besides?"

"I can stop anytime regardless of my editor's opinion. And so, I'll continue."

The first voice said decisively, and then asked.

"Do you understand now?"

"To tell you the truth, I didn't get it at all."

The other voice answered.

"I think that's a good thing, though."

"Really?"

"Though being an author myself, I probably don't understand it well enough. Maybe I'm just confused. And maybe I continue to write afterwords to understand it better."

"Uh-huh."

"Now then, the afterword's over. I have to write something for the next volume again. …Until next time."

"Until next time."

The rustling of thin sheets of paper was heard, and eventually stopped.

Spring, 2001

Sigsawa Keiichi

Translator's Notes

1. ↑ A slight modification. In Japanese, his name is really pronounced as 'E-RU-ME-SU', but the problem is, it is actually pronounced with an 'H' in English, which is what he was trying to correct here.
2. ↑ 'HACCP' (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) is originally a production process for monitoring of artillery shells during WWII and later on, applied to food, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals and other commercial products.
3. ↑ *"Oya no kao ga mitai"* is a Japanese expression used when criticizing the behavior of a child. That is , if a child misbehaves, one thinks that the parents are equally to blame for not bringing him up properly.
4. ↑ Most of these names were from numbers: Hen was probably from *ein*, the German word for one. The rest are probably from Greek. Duo is two, Tria is one form for the number three, Tettara or Tetra is from *tettares* related to four, Hex is from *hexa* which means six, and Hepta is seven. Freja is not a number though; it is German for Freya, the Norse goddess of love and beauty.
5. ↑ Adapted in anime episode 10. Also included in the first PS2 visual novel.

6. ↑ If ‘true blue sky’ sounds familiar, it’s because you’ve heard something similar in the third story in anime episode 11. Only the last part of this chapter was featured in the anime though.
7. ↑ It’s really written as ‘×××××’. You can think of it as a censor *beep*. In Kino no Tabi, ‘×××××’ denotes taboo word/s, like Kino’s real name.
8. ↑ I think this is one of the reasons why the first part of the story has no narration at all. If the interior of the country were to be described, the twist would have been revealed. The other reasons depend on your own interpretation of this story….
9. ↑ Pronoun use lost in translation. Inid refers to her current self as ‘watashi’, and her past self as ‘ore’. Both means ‘I’, the difference being ‘ore’ is a much stronger variant which emphasizes masculinity or superiority.
10. ↑ This is a parody of the prologue of Volume 1 (If you didn't have the chance to read it, but know the anime, it was also the prologue of Episode 12).